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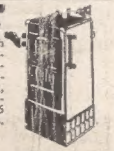

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WESTERN ACTION

Volume 21 November, 1957 Number 3

Featured Novel

THE MARAUDERS ..... **Ed Keller 6**

There were those in town who wanted to get hold of the Richel ranch, but Tod Richel didn't care about that. Raiders from across the border had slain Tod's brother, and Richel was dedicated to vengeance. He'd go into Mexico and hunt down the leader of these marauders, the notorious Pancho Villa himself!

Other Stories and Features

THE TRADING POST ..... **Harold Gluck 57**

Speaking of the mighty Bear Boscoe, Mr. Gluck assures us that, after all, there was "Only One Man Of The West".

MIGHTY ROUGH SPELL ..... **Lee Floren 59**

When they saw the condition James Clyman was in, they figured he'd had more than just a little bit of difficulty . . .

TORCH OF DEATH (Judge Steele story) ..... **Lon Williams 60**

Wade Claybrook knew, and Judge Steele began to realize, that there was no solid evidence at all against this murder suspect. So Claybrook bluffed.

HOW TO SHOOT A MAN ALIVE ..... **Bess Ritter 70**

The way characters get killed in Western movies looks more and more real all the time. Here's some inside dope on how the tricks are done.

THE CATTLE BORROWER ..... **Julius Elman 71**

Rustling can be something of an art, and Manuel Carillo was proud of his proficiency. So proud that he wouldn't tolerate amateurs on his grounds.

THE LITTLE THINGS ..... **Ed Keller 77**

The only way Lance Bryant would know who the man he wanted was, was when that person tried to kill him!

ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.*

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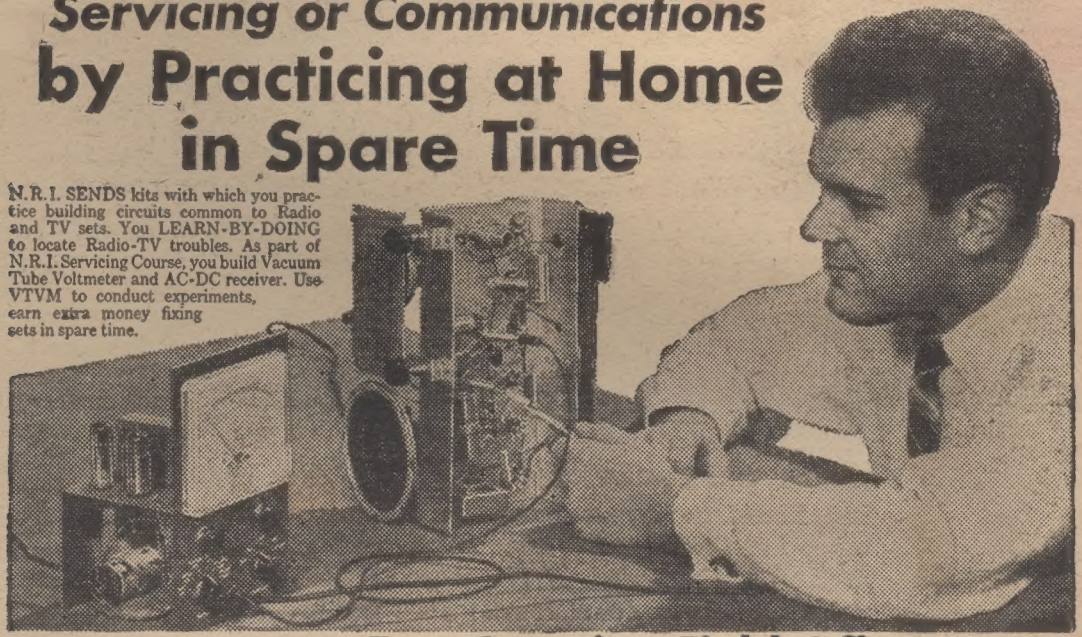

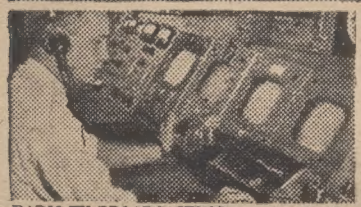

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THE MARAUDERS

Novel of Border Raiders

by Ed Keller

Pancho Villa's raiders had killed his brother, and Tod Richel no longer cared about his enemies in town. Let them have the ranch! He and Whopper Jackson had a mission of vengeance ahead of them. They would hunt down Pancho Villa and settle the score themselves!

GRAY MOONLIGHT shone down softly on the little 'dobe ranch house that lay a mile north of the Rio Grande. Dark shadows from the thorny mesquite clumps fell upon the sand. All around the drab, sun-baked walls of the house were tall, sentinel-like cottonwood trees, their leaves murmuring in the faint night breeze. Back of the house in a pole corral, half a dozen horses in the remuda lifted their heads, ears pricked forward, listening.

Far off to the south the hint of muffled hoof-beats rode the whispering breeze. A body of horse-backers rode warily through the moonlight. Men with peaked sombreros on their heads and rifles in scabbards that rubbed against their saddles and the wet flanks of the horses. As the riders approached the house, a coyote off in the peaks wailed mournfully, as if sensing what was to come.

Inside the little ranch house, Tod Richel jerked from his sound sleep as suddenly as if someone had called to him. On the edge of his bunk he sat tense, listening. He heard the coyote's wail, a shuddering cry that makes the flesh crawl. Out there in the eerie night men were coming nearer the house, stealthily, cautiously, dark blotches of black against the lesser gloom of night.

Quickly Tod slipped into his clothes, pulled on his boots. Clutching up his 30-30 Winchester near the bed he ran to the window. Just as he got there, thundering hoof-beats, crashing rifles and the yells of men filled the night. Outside in the gloom-spawned night those riders in peaked sombreros

"I'm giving you an even break for your life, Villa."

charged out of the brush, straight at the house, like longhorns in stampede.

Tod ducked as lead sang through the open window and smacked soddenly against the 'dobe walls. Above the bedlam he yelled:

"Ase! A raid, Ase! It's Villa, damn him! Keep covered!"

Across the room a boy sprang from his bunk, blinking his sleep-drugged eyes as he ran for his gun. In the gloom, his face turned ashen beneath the tan. Once beside his older brother at the window, Ase Richel stooped, white-knuckled right hand gripping his sixgun.

"Where's—where's Whopper, Tod?"

"Here I is, boys! Look at 'em out there—them chili-eatin' brown men gunnin' fo' us. I knowed it was comin'. The ol' snake haid he tells me, he whispehs me warnin' but it comes too late."

His words were drowned in the din. Scuttling across the floor toward the two men at the window came Whopper Jackson, face black and shiny in the dimness. In one paw he held a gun. Whopper had known there was blood on the moon; his mummified rattler's head had told him hours ago. In the middle of the night he had awakened and hearkened to the whisperings of that snake's head. Now he was crawling across the floor of the front room. "Yes, suh! I seed her a-comin'."

"Hobble yore tongue now, Whopper!" Tod roared. "Get to that other

window. You, Ase, stay with me. Give 'em hell!"

Already Tod Richel's sixgun was spewing. Outside the circling horsemen ducked low over the necks of their racing horses. Rifle muzzles spewed red flame. Suddenly one of the riders screamed, his hands flung upward.

TOD RICHEL grinned, cold as death. Gunpowder choked him, burned his slitted eyes. Hunched over at the window he aimed and fired, ducked and reloaded. Leaden pellets plucked at his shoulder. At his side, his brother blazed away until his gun barrel grew hot. Their fire was taking toll. Three times they saw men topple from the backs of horses, hit the ground and bounce like sacks of wheat.

"It's Villa, Tod!" Ase gritted through clenched teeth. "I think I saw him pass them. A big, thick-shouldered hombre on a bay! We'll whip 'em, damn 'em! We'll send 'em back across the river with their tails down. Soon be dawn!"

Tod grinned encouragingly. A nerve-prickling warning told him they couldn't whip that band of cut-throats out there; they were outnumbered a dozen times over. But they'd go down trying. Tod thrilled to the courage of these two men in the room with him. One of them was his brother, still in his teens. But he had guts, that kid Ase. White as a sheet, but he'd fight like a wildcat until they burst in the door; then he'd spit in their faces.

Through the haze of gunsmoke, Tod paid Whopper Jackson a quick glance. Jackson was yelling like an insane man, lips curled back, eyes sparkling. White or black, there was a man! No cringing in the corner, whimpering. Fighting like a cornered lobo, defiant of the bullets that sang past his powerful body.

"Nother down, suh! Chalk him up, Tod. Gittin' gray in de east an' they's goin' cause they bellies is full. Come closer, brown boys, let me git close 'nuff to whittle. Yaller! Yore yaller..."

He kept yelling, his jumbled words losing themselves in the blasting gunfire.

"They're leavin', Ase!" Tod shouted.

Ase leaped to his feet, yelling for joy. Tod cried a belated warning.

"We whipped 'em—Tod! We—"

The words choked in Ase Richel's throat. His body jarred back from the impact of lead. Stunned, horror and suprise in his eyes, he stared at Tod, who grabbed him to keep him from falling to the floor.

"Ase!"

The boy slumped in Tod's arms as if tired. His eyelids fluttered and a strange, twisted grin came to his lips. Tod ran with him to one of the bunks. The front of Ase Richel's flannel shirt was turning crimson.

Tod dropped to his knees beside the bunk. He forgot those killers out there in the murky light of early dawn. They were hurriedly picking up their dead, riding like demons for the river. But Tod didn't know that. He didn't know when the firing ceased. Through a blur of tears he stared transfixed down into the set white face of his brother.

Ase's bloodless lips moved. He remained motionless but his eyes sought Tod's face. He looked into Tod's eyes as a dying man does when he is peering into the Great Beyond.

"I'm not afraid, Tod," he whispered. "I'm—not afraid—to die—"

Tod tried to say things but the words wouldn't come. He shut his eyes against the bitter tears. He bit his lips until they bled.

When Tod opened his eyes he saw the warm morning sunlight streaming in through the bullet-splintered window. It speared across the room and

fell upon the still silent form of Ase who was dead.

Slowly Tod rose to his feet. Like a man in a daze he stood on wide-spread legs, his broad shoulders slumped. His face was mask-like, white as alkali. He stared dully at the huge bent form of Whopper Jackson who was on his knees at the other end of the room praying. In Whopper's clasped hands were his dagger and the shriveled, dried head of a rattlesnake.

Whopper didn't move as Tod walked out of the house into the early morning sunlight. For an hour or more Tod walked around the weatherbeaten ranch buildings, trying to collect his thoughts. Trying to face the grim realities of all that had happened. The Villa raid of only a few hours ago seemed like a horrible nightmare from which he should soon awaken. At the whitewashed bronc pen Tod looked at Ase's favorite cutting-horse. Everywhere he saw reminders of his brother who was dead. In the shed was Tod's handtooled kak, and an Indian blanket.

SOMETHING died in Tod Richel in the passing of his brother. Ase was dead! It was hard to believe. Tod wandered about the place like a man in a dream, a fierce bitterness assailing him.

Then toward noon, Tod returned to the house. In the doorway stood Whopper Jackson, a stricken look in his eyes. Neither man looked directly at the other. They kept looking off at the endless expanse of brush where the heat devils danced off the sand into the cloudless sky.

"Come with me, Whopper," said Tod.

From pine boards they constructed a coffin. It wasn't much to look at. But they built it the best they knew how. Tod lined it with a fleecy blanket which had been his mother's. Then the two men dug a grave beneath the cottonwoods near the house. They dug it on a little swell where Ase used to love to sit in the twilight and smoke after the day's grueling work.

Neither man said a word as they worked. The hot noonday sun beat down on them. They buried Ase Richel, wrapped in his Indian blanket, and carried rocks for a marker over the mound. There was no ceremony or words or ritual. Everything was deathly still. Only the heavy breathing of the two men whose eyes were misty. Everything seemed so ironically peaceful. The faint odor of greasewood filled the air, and it was hot.

When the task was finished, Tod looked down at the grave. His eyes weren't blue now, like the sky. They were red, dull, staring. Beside him stood Whopper Jackson. At their feet lay two shovels. Their heads were bared and perspiration beaded their flushed faces. Finally Tod's colorless lips moved.

"He—he got you, Ase," he whispered huskily, voice vibrant with hate. "Villa got you. But I'll get him... I'll square the account if I have to trail him through hell!"

Tod seemed to forget the presence of Whopper Jackson, who followed him. When they came out they had their blanket rolls and a few personal belongings. About their waists were cartridge belts and holstered sixguns.

Grim resolution in his stride, Tod went to the bronc pen and saddled one of the horses. His eyes held a strange glint. The glint that comes into a man's eyes when he kills. Whopper Jackson slapped a rig on his own horse. As they rode out of the corral they left the gate open so the other horses could run free.

Then through the shimmering heat they spurred away at an easy lope along the rutted, brush-hemmed wagon road that led to the little Border town of Tres Ritos, five miles to the east. And neither man looked back at the freshly-rounded grave, that lay a mile north of the sluggish Rio Grande.

- 2 -

AS THEY topped a ridge, Tod Richel reined in. Whopper pulled in beside him. Whopper looked like a mountain of black brawn, his expressionless dark face shaded by the brim of his flopping brimmed Stetson. He followed Tod's gaze. Three horsemen were racing across the brushy mesa flat toward them.

Tod sat stiff in his kak. As the riders reined in, dust rose from beneath the chopping hoofs of the lathered horses. The man in the lead was a big barrel-chested gent with a star on his sagging vest. He wore a white Stetson. His sneaking gray eyes searched Tod's stony face. The other two riders bore the killer brand as plainly as a notched ear marks a cow. Killers—hiding behind deputy sheriffs' stars!

"What the hell's the matter, Tod?" the big lawman blustered. "You look plumb peaked."

Tod's silence, his glinting eyes jangled the lawman's nerves. He looked from Tod to the set face of Whopper, then back.

"What do you want, Stoy?" asked Tod quietly.

Big Bart Stoy, the sheriff, threw up his arms. "Nothing wrong with me, Tod," he growled. "A cowpoke just rode into town an' said he thought he heerd shootin' out at yore place early this mornin'. Me'n the boys just figured we'd ride out an' see if anything was wrong. Villa bein' across the Line raisin' hell, I thought mebby—"

"Yo're about ten hours too late, Stoy."

Sheriff Bart Stoy's brows lifted as if surprised. He glanced quickly at his men, at the inscrutable black face of Whopper, then back to Tod. His lips parted. The thin mustache across his upper lips looked like a pencil line.

"Too late, Tod?" he rumbled. "What do yuh mean?"

"Villa raided us this morning." Tod turned his head. Color drained from his face and his jaws clamped. "They—they killed Ase."

"Cripes—Tod—"

Whatever else Sheriff Bart Stoy might have said mattered little to Tod Richel. He didn't want to hear it. He hated this blustering, loud-mouthed lawman from Tres Ritos. Tod dug in his spurs, raced on along the wagon trail toward town.

Tod didn't look back at the three lawmen who sat motionless on their horses watching him. Tod raced on, bitter thoughts plaguing him. The warm breeze whipped against his feverish cheeks. His eyes burned. Burned like his thoughts that made him want to kill! He hated big Bart Stoy, and any mealy-mouthed condolences this flashily-dressed lawman might offer would only fire deeper the hate in Tod's soul.

As he rode, Tod's mind raced with thoughts of Stoy—and Helen Moore. Despite Stoy's blustering shallowness he had unaccountably worked himself into Helen's favor. Just a friendliness and nothing more, Helen had laughingly chided Tod when he had broached the subject of Stoy's attentions. And Tod, feeling abashed, had mumbled embarrassedly and tried to forget Stoy's frequent trips to Moore's Circle-E ranch, and the sway this dude lawman held over Rawhide Moore.

Lately, fiery old Rawhide, in an effort to recoup his beef losses from drouth, had listened to Stoy's tales of the Carranzistas below the Border in Chihuahua who were pushed for beef and were paying unbelievable prices for cows on the hoof. They had an army to feed. Beef was scarce. Pancho Villa, the renegade, virtually crushed since his exodus from Mexico City as

the country's ruler, was on the rampage again and had played havoc with the herds.

Rawhide Moore had listened to Stoy tell this story. Old Rawhide's eyes had flashed with hope. He was a gambler, was old Rawhide. A hard, two-fisted old gent who knew the cow business from the word go, but with a heart of gold. He was thinking of Helen's future, he told Tod Richel once, when the subject of a beef drive below the Line had been mentioned. Helen who was wearing Tod's diamond engagement ring, was worshipped by the oldster. His sleek Herefords, good whiskey and his daughter came first with old Rawhide.

"Mebby the sheriff is right, Tod," Rawhide had argued. "Shippin' by rail to Kansas is expensive. Prices ain't what they should be here. Trailin' my herd down to Chihuahua might put me on my feet again. Stoy says he'll shut his eyes, an' for me to cross the river with 'em at night. That way I'd miss havin' to pay a head tax an' no bother about inspection. I tell yuh I'm considerin' it, Tod. I know yuh don't like Stoy, but mebby it's because yuh don't know him well enough. He seems a nice enough feller. If I do make the drive below the Line I'm bankin' on yuh helpin' me."

TOD HAD argued against it. But he knew it would do no good once Rawhide made up his mind.

"You'd be askin' for trouble if yuh did, Rawhide. Villa is runnin' wild. Renegades are runnin' loose across the Line, thievin', plunderin' an' killin'. Such a trip would only fetch yuh grief I'm afraid, Rawhide."

And that was all that had been said about it. But Stoy had continued his arguments why such a drive should be made. Only a matter of friendly interest with him of course, he had shrugged. But Tod wondered. And as the days passed, the dislike Tod held for the swaggering sheriff of Tres Ritos flamed into a deep-seated, burning hate.

But it wasn't solely Stoy's intimacy with Helen and her father that had aroused that hate. Tod knew that the sheriff was playing directly into the hands of Durango Duke who owned the *Border House Saloon* in town. These two men controlled the politics of the entire county. They owned Tres Ritos lock, stock and barrel. No, it wasn't only because of Helen that Tod hated Stoy. It was partly because of that closeness between Durango Duke, the sauve little gambler, and Bart Stoy, the law, who worked hand in glove with one another.

The fact that Stoy was friends with Durango Duke convinced Tod of the sheriff's crookedness. Duke was crooked as a snake—and everybody knew it. But they were afraid of him, of his uncanny power. Clever, was the Duke. Soft-spoken, oily, he had built around him an organization of gunmen. Men on his payroll, who ostensibly jiggered his cow spread at the edge of town. But in reality they were men with tied-down guns who knew a lot more about guns than cows. And Durango Duke was their master.

Now as he rode into the outskirts of Tres Ritos, Tod thought of all this. For the time he had forgotten the presence of big Whopper Jackson, his one loyal rider, who jogged along at his side. Now Whopper was staring at him with the concern a mozo has for his lord.

"You ain't said a word for the last fo' miles, Tod. I been watchin' the lights in yo' eyes. They's a-sparklin' with deep thinkin'. An' now I'm just wonderin's what yuh want me to do."

Tod's lined face relaxed. A tired smile touched his lips. "Stay right beside me, Whopper," he said grimly. "We're takin' a long ride soon."

"Yes, suh, Tod," said Whopper. "I'm ready."

Whopper seemed to sense that the ride would be on a killer's trail—the trail of the big Mexican, Pancho Villa, who had killed Ase in the raid this morning. Whopper must know, too, that once they crossed the Rio the chances were ten to one they would never return. Men die easily in Mexico...

But no fear shone in Whopper's wide eyes. His right hand raised to the collar of his faded denim jacket. His huge paw caressed the bone handle of his razor-sharp knife that he carried between his shoulder blades next to his body in a leather sheath.

Whopper was an artist at knife throwing. He could pin a card to the wall at thirty paces. Whirl and throw with the speed of a man drawing his gun. He used to practice day and night out at the ranch. And every time he hit his mark he'd grin and rub his hands together. When he'd miss he'd grumble for days.

Now along Tres Ritos' single street, Tod Richel and Whopper Jackson rode past the two rows of 'dobe homes that flanked the dusty street. Tres Ritos was like a hundred other cow-towns down along the Rio. Ahead lay the General Store and across from it was the *Border House*. There were false-fronted buildings that were warped and badly in need of paint.

AT THE TIE-POLE in front of the *Border House*, the two riders halted. Trailing reins, they clanked across the plank walk through the batwing doors. The sun had already dropped over the jagged mountain rim to the west and the shadows were deep inside the saloon.

Just inside the doors, Tod blinked, accustoming his eyes to the gloom. He paid no more than a passing glance to the half dozen customers. He and Whopper stepped up to the bar. They waited until the fat barkeep finished lighting the huge oil ceiling lamps. When he had returned to his position behind the bar, Tod said quietly: "Where's Duke, Andy?"

The barman caught the deadly glint in Richel's red-rimmed eyes. His pig eyes flew wide. He brushed one hand over his jaw.

"Why now, Tod, Mister Duke's sommers about the place. Yuh look like yuh'd seen a ghost. Better have a drink—"

"Where's Durango Duke, Andy?"

Richel's voice was soft. Too soft, and cold. His eyes narrowed. Loose talk didn't seem to interest Tod now.

"He's in the back room," the barman faltered. Fear came into his puckered eyes. "I just didn't want to bother him. You see—"

"Forget it, Andy," said Tod flatly.

Sudden silence had dropped over the barroom. Silence that only the sputtering of the oil lamps overhead disturbed. The customers at the bar had turned, were staring at Tod and Jackson.

Tod turned as if to go toward a rear door that was marked "Private." He took one step, stopped. That rear door opened. Now in the doorway stood a swarthy, medium-sized gent in a black business suit and two-color, hand-stitched boots. He was smiling—like a corpse.

"Looking for me, Richel?"

Durango Duke's voice held a fascinating soft charm. Cold, like water dripping on steel. He smiled and raised one white, womanish hand in a gesture of surprised pleasure.

"Yes," said Tod slowly. "I want to talk to you, Duke."

Tod's voice drifted into the hush. Leaving Whopper at the bar, he moved toward the smiling figure in the rear doorway. Tod's spurs jangled musically. He stepped past Durango Duke who softly closed the door on the stares of the spectators in at the bar.

Tod Richel had never been in this

rear office before. He'd heard about it. Heard that deals had been consummated here that had to do with cows and horses—and the lives of men! There was a flat-topped, battered desk in the center of the room. Pictures of scantily-clad dancing girls on the white-washed board walls. Not much else. No windows. Tod took it all in at a glance. Then he looked at Durango Duke who had eased down into a chair behind the table. Duke was watching him speculatively, black eyes gleaming like a snake's.

"Sit down, Tod," he said graciously.

"Reckon not, Duke."

Durango Duke shrugged, poured himself a drink of berreteaga. As he downed it and daintily polished his lips with a handkerchief, Tod said: "I've come to accept yore offer of the ranch, Duke."

It seemed to hurt Tod, saying that. Durango Duke just smiled. "You're smart, Tod. I made you a good offer for your place."

Tod's eyes slitted. He stood there in front of the desk, his tall frame drawn taut.

"You've been tryin' to buy mine an' Ase's little spread a long time, Duke," he gritted. "You offered me eight thousand for it. I laughed at you then." Richel paused, tan face hardening. "I'll take yuh up now, Duke. I'll take yore lousy eight thousand. Villa crossed the Rio last night—raided us. I don't know why. We didn't have enough beef to bother about. But he did. Ase was killed."

DURANGO DUKE'S smile dropped from his lips. He made an effort to look sad.

"Oh, that's too bad, Richel. Too bad," he sighed. "You must bear up under the blow, Richel. Something must be done about Villa crossing the Line, murdering, stealing over here. Something—"

"Forget that now, Duke," Tod cut in coldly. "I'm through in the cow business. The place is yores if yuh still want it. Seems yo're the only one in the Big Bend who's got enough money to buy anything."

"The deal still holds, Tod," smiled Duke. "I'm a man of my word."

He stepped to the door, called instructions to the barkeep. It wasn't long until a man came into the rear room with a heavy sack of money. When he departed, Tod signed the necessary papers, accepted eight thousand dollars in bills of large denomination. He stuffed the money in a money belt Duke offered him and wrapped it around him beneath his shirt.

The deal had only taken a matter of minutes. It seemed to please Durango Duke when it was over. Of late, in at the bar, Duke had drunk more than usual. He had made brags to those who listened that he'd be the biggest cow king in the country yet. If anybody wanted to sell out at the right price he'd buy it just like that. Now he had bought out Tod Richel.

Duke followed Tod to the door, closed it behind him. A cunning grin on his lips, he listened until he heard Tod and Whopper Jackson depart through the batwing doors into the darkness.

Then Duke opened the door of his office again and nodded toward a spindle-legged, furtive-eyed little gent who had eased into the barroom the last few minutes. Alone in the rear office with the little gunman, Duke said slowly: "You're to get Richel and Jackson, Pinky," he said significantly. His voice was hard as flint and he didn't smile. "You're to get them. Richel has a money belt around him with my money in it. I want that belt and money. Got it, Pinky?"

"I got it, Duke," nodded the gunman tonelessly. His nervous hands kept fondling the tape-butted guns at his scrawny hips. "I got it."

Then he departed.

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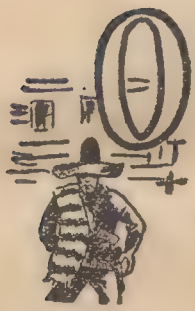

OUTSIDE the *Border House Saloon,* Tod strode through the darkness, toward the drooping-headed broncs at the hitch-rack. Halfway there he stopped, turned to Jackson.

"Hungry, Whopper? Mebby we'd best take time to grab a bite down there at the chink's place."

"I'm not hungry, Tod."

"We'd best eat something."

Neither was Tod Richel especially hungry. Yet he knew the wise thing to do was for him and Whopper to eat something. The plan he had in mind might mean they wouldn't have an opportunity to eat again all next day. Around his waist was a money belt with eight thousand dollars in cash in it. His and Ase's Box-M spread was a thing of the past, he reflected bitterly. Morning would find him and Whopper riding the desert wastes of Chihuahua—one quest in mind: finding Pancho Villa's camp. Settling things! Of course neither of them would come out of it alive. But it didn't matter to Tod Richel now. Nothing mattered. He'd ride out to the Circle-M, see Helen and explain to her.

The two were striding side by side down the plank walk toward the little chink restaurant, a few doors ahead. The other false-fronted buildings were dark. A group of cowmen stood in the darkness across the street, talking. No one else was along the street. It was too early for the night's activity to begin in Tres Ritos. Later—

A furtive sound behind them stung Tod's ears, coursing tides of warning up his spine. He kept looking straight ahead, every muscle of his tall body tensed for action. Then, with the speed of a springing puma, he threw himself flat on the board walk, shoving the big black man to one side as he fell.

A gun roared, the red muzzle flame spewing into the inky shadows. Whopper Jackson bellowed a startled curse, right hand instinctively slithering up to the knife at the back of his neck. Tod felt the drive of that bullet past his head. A gun had come into his own hand like magic. It roared once—straight at the dim figure of a crouched man between the two buildings. The man groaned, crumpled to the ground.

Tod came to his feet, gun still in hand. He ignored the yells of the cowmen across the street as they came running through the darkness toward him. He dashed back toward his horse in front of the *Border House,* Whopper Jackson at his heels. The big black man had his knife in one hand.

"Tod, boy, that's shootin'!"

"There's gonna be more, Whopper! Get yore horse!"

The two of them hit the backs of their horses in flying leaps. Jerking up the reins, their plunging horses shot forward. The batwing doors of the saloon burst open and a half dozen men poured out into the street. They had guns in their hands, pointing and yelling at Tod and Whopper who were bent over the necks of the racing horses, fast losing themselves in the night.

Back there in front of the saloon stood Durango Duke, black eyes blazing with wrath. He had a pearl-handled six-gun in one hand and he was yelling orders to his men. Guns blazed in the direction of the two fleeing riders.

"Tod Richel just killed Pinky Avers!" Duke yelled furiously. "He just now murdered him in cold blood!"

And the hurriedly congregated crowd of men didn't seem to think it strange that Durango Duke should know that Pinky Avers was dead even

before they found the little killer sprawled on the ground between two of the buildings. But he was dead all right. Duke had been right about that. There was a bullet hole through his forehead. And Duke kept telling them that Richel had done it. Tod had killed him in cold blood, Duke said—after an argument with little Pinky Avers in the saloon.

Tod and Whopper, feeding spurs to their horses as they raced through the mesquite east of town, didn't know all that, but there were several things Tod did know. It didn't take much figuring to decide who had tried to bushwhack him—and why!

Tod grinned wolfishly in the darkness. A mile east of town he eased off to the left of the trail into a grove of cottonwood trees that surrounded a foul-smelling water-hole. In the deep shadows he sat tense in the kak, listening, watching the bewilderment in Whopper's eyes. No sound broke the rush of the night except for the deep breathing of the two horses, and the slight rustle of the cottonwood leaves overhead. For the moment pursuit was outdistanced. Tod's sinewy body relaxed.

"Seems like hell's doggin' our heels, Whopper," said Tod quietly.

BIG WHOPPER'S eyes rolled in their sockets. His right hand caressed the mummified snake's head that rested in his flannel shirt pocket beneath his denim jacket.

"Ol' snake's whisperin' funny things, Tod," he murmured. "But I cain't figer why fo' dat killin' man tried to git yuh in de back."

"That's easy, Whopper. Durango Duke's been crowdin' me to buy my place for months. He's gone land crazy. Buyin' up all the land an' beef he can lay a hand to. I sold the place to him tonight for eight thousand dollars which I got on me right now. If I'm readin' sign right he sent one of his two-bit gunhands out to beef us an' get that money back. I thought the deal went too smooth."

Whopper Jackson's eyes widened.

"Now," snapped Tod grimly. "You wait here for me. Stay in the brush an' keep quiet. I'll be back pronto. I'm goin' to the Circle-M. Then we're crossin' the Line tonight—killin'!"

Tod raced off through the dingy mantle of darkness that lay over the mesquite-dotted country. He'd have to work fast. In another hour the moon would be up. As he rode hard toward the Circle-M, two miles to the east, he was plagued by the bitter injustice of his lot.

Three lives had been smashed in the happenings of the past twenty-four hours. Ase was dead. Tod's life had been wrecked, his hopes of the future tumbled into the dust. Now he was an outlaw—a murderer. Durango Duke would see to it that he was branded such. And in the ruins, Tod had dragged Helen Moore down with him. Helen had promised to become his bride. But that was all out now, Tod felt. In killing the bushwhacker to save his life, he had also killed all hopes of ever claiming Helen for his own.

But it would have been the same anyhow, Tod reflected. He knew that if he crossed the Rio he would eventually find Pancho Villa's camp. Yes, he could get to that big greaser renegade all right. But after he gut-shot Villa, thus squaring the account for Ase's death, his own life wouldn't be worth a plugged peso.

But before he left, Tod wanted to explain to Helen. He wanted her to know how everything had happened. Tod Richel's lips drew tight across his teeth. His eyes burned. The devil had dealt him strange cards in this game of life...

THROUGH the starlit night, over the rolling prairie of the Big Bend he raced. Where a fringe of timber half hid the Circle-M ranch buildings, Tod reined in his jaded horse. Again in-

stinct warned him of danger. He was positive that word of the killing in town hadn't yet reached out here. Yet—

He left his horse and walked past the white-washed corrals toward the main house. Light streamed out through the windows. At the front door stood a saddled bronc. Sheriff Bart Stoy's horse! Tod cursed softly as he eased through the gloom nearer the house. Farther back in the trees was the bunk house. It was dark, quiet. That was queer. Where were the Circle-M riders?

In some brush twenty feet from the front door, Tod started. On the vine clad portico of the low-flung 'dobe ranch house stood Helen Moore, alone. Inside the house Tod caught the muffled tread of a man moving about.

"Helen!" he called guardedly.

She gave a startled little cry, her right hand fluttering to her mouth. Then she rushed out to where Tod was standing. In the gloom the loveliness of her pale face was accentuated by her dark curly hair. She looked so fragile and soft. Her fresh gingham dress made her slim-waisted figure all the more attractive.

"Tod!" she cried, shaken. "I just heard about—about Ase. Sheriff Bart Stoy's in the house now. He rode in about an hour ago and told me."

Tod tried to hide his own feelings. Briefly, he told her of the Villa raid at dawn out at his ranch. Ase had died. He related it, and his face drained ashen and became deep-lined. He kept looking toward the house as he talked. He didn't want her to see his eyes. Then when he finished he looked down. There were tears in her eyes.

"Tod," she whispered tremulously, "I'm—I'm sorry."

"It's past now, Helen," he told her unsteadily. Then he hurriedly told her of selling the place to Durango Duke, and his being forced to kill one of Duke's men. Tod saw a shudder pass over the girl's body. She drew back, appalled, as he told her all this and that he was riding across the river tonight on Villa's trail.

"It wasn't enough of a blow—Ase's death," she said weakly. "You—you had to kill a man! You've branded yourself a murderer! And now you're running away from it all—hounding another man—to kill him!"

Her words, her coolness, stabbed into Tod like killer lead.

"Helen, honey—!"

"Oh, I understand, Tod," she hurried on. "Then—then we're through?"

"Not if you'll wait for me—gamble with me that I'll come back. I don't want it to ruin yore life, Helen. You just don't understand. I've made a vow over Ase's grave that I'd get Pancho Villa."

"Then that vow means more than our happiness?" asked Helen coolly.

"I guess so," Tod whispered miserably. His eyes dropped. "But there's a chance I'll come through alive, Helen. I could do a lot of things if I knew you were waitin' for me."

SHE REACHED up and touched his cheek. "You poor boy," she murmured sympathetically. "I know how you feel. I was just thinking of you. That's why I was standing out here. I wanted to be alone, to think. Bart is inside, getting some of dad's things for him."

"I don't want sympathy, Helen. I—"

Tod looked up as a sudden noise came from the doorway of the house. Helen whirled. Richel's hand whipped out his gun, the savage movement of a cornered beast. In the door stood big Bart Stoy, his massive figure black against the lamplight that streamed out into the night past him. He laughed shortly, but his eyes were gleaming slits.

"Why the proddin' urge, Richel?" he grated. "Ain't you had enough trouble?"

Tod's hot retort was checked by Helen.

"Put up that gun, Tod!" she cried. She was shaken, white. "You might have killed him! Bart just came past for some of dad's things and to tell me about Ase."

Tod holstered his gun. "Where's yore father, Helen?"

"In town," she replied. "Outfitting at the General Store for the drive into Chihuahua at dawn."

Tod gasped. "He's not really makin' that drive, is he? Why he's mad! If there is a market for his beef at the Carranza camp in Chihuahua there's not one chance in a hundred of him gittin' through. Villa an' his killers are raisin' hell. Renegades an' cut-throats are roamin' the hills over there like slobberin' lobo packs." He whirled on the sheriff who was smiling tauntingly. "I can't sabe why yo're goadin' Rawhide into this, Stoy!" he rapped fiercely. "Where do you come in?"

Big Bart Stoy stiffened with sudden anger. Helen turned on Tod.

"Bart is simply interested in seeing dad come out of the hole, Tod," she admonished. "He's good enough to help dad get across the river without inspection and head tax."

Hot words flooded past Tod's lips as he looked from the sneaking-eyed lawman back to the girl. "Not a chance of Rawhide makin' it. It'd take an army of gunfighters to take those cows through!"

"You're just panicky," scoffed the girl. "He'll have gunhands. The regular riders wouldn't agree to go, so Bart and Durango Duke were good enough to round up some men who have the nerve to go. Men who can use their guns if it's necessary!"

"Durango Duke! Duke linin' up gun-fighters for Rawhide!"

UGLY SUSPICIONS grew in Richel's racing mind. Durango Duke and Stoy were lining up Rawhide Moore's men for that foolish drive across the Line. Gunmen! Duke's men likely. Duke and Stoy weren't doing it through any charitable move to lend Rawhide Moore help in his long gamble. They were roweling the oldster on for some reason.

"Tod!" the girl exclaimed suddenly. "You're going into Chihuahua anyhow. Go with dad on the drive. Oh, please do! I'd feel so much better about it if you were along."

Tod thrilled to the pleading note in the girl's voice. Ignoring Stoy, who stood in the doorway watching them, he led the girl off a few feet into the darkness.

"You really want me to go with him—kinda kill two birds with one stone? Help yore dad on the drive an' settle my own score with Villa?"

"Yes, Tod."

"An' if I do," Tod said quickly. "An' do live to come back you'll—"

"I'll be waiting, Tod—hoping for you."

Helen Moore was smiling tragically, her alluring red lips parted and her eyes misty with emotions.

"I'll come back," Tod promised huskily. "I'll make it somehow. I'll do it for—you!"

Then he was gone, running to his waiting horse. When the drum of his horse's hoofs faded away in the night, Sheriff Stoy strolled up to Helen Moore's side. He was smiling thinly.

"You think of everything, don't you, sweetheart?" he murmured, hugging the girl. "He can help yore dad with his fast an' easy guns an' be protectin' our interests."

"Yes," she said, looking up into Stoy's handsome face. "Dad thinks the world of Tod. I tried to break the news to him but I just didn't have the courage. Even dad doesn't know we're in love, Bart."

It was only a few moments later that Bart Stoy, some personal effects of Rawhide Moore's under his arm, kissed

the girl good-by and rode hard through the night toward Tres Ritos. In the darkness his eyes shone with triumph.

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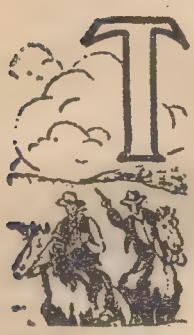

TOD RICHEL made straight for the water-hole when he left Helen Moore. The moon peeped out now from behind cloud-banks, and as Tod pulled in near the smelly pool, his eyes searched the murky shadows beneath the trees.

"Whopper!" he called softly. "Whopper!"

"Here I is, Tod."

So well had the man been concealed in the tangled thicket close by, Tod had failed to see him. Whopper eased his horse out into the open. Beneath the flopping brim of his hat his eyes were clouded with worry.

"Ol' snake, he's been whisperin' o' trubble, Tod. He been saying things. Yes, suh—"

"Forget that snake now, Whopper," Tod said grimly. "There's trouble ahead—plenty of it! An' we're ridin' hell-for-leather into it. Goin' with old Rawhide Moore on his drive below the Line. Don't ask questions now. You ride for the lower flat down near Dead man's Crossin'. Moore has his herd bedded down there an' is hazin' 'em across come dawn. Wait for me there. I'm headin' into town to find the old fool!"

Tod's words cracked with the commanding note of a Ranger captain. He started to rake spurs when drumming hoofs checked him. Tensing, he rode in the stirrups, peered cautiously over the manzanita clumps. Along the wagon trail a hundred yards to the south, a rider was fogging through the moonlight toward town. It was Sheriff Bart Stoy.

Tod waited until he was out of sight, then loped toward town. Big Whopper headed straight south without a word of protest, though he had wagged his head puzzledly and murmured something about trouble.

As he rode, Tod eased his two holstered guns farther to the front. His jaws set with grim determination. Stoy had beat him into town. By now the news of the killing of Duke's hired gun-fighter had reached Stoy's ears. Tod felt sure Helen hadn't told the lawman. By this time Stoy would be on the look-out for him, anxious to jail him on a murder charge.

"I've got to get to Rawhide," Tod mused bitterly. "Got to warn him against takin' Duke's men along. It smells of skunk oil to me."

DOWN THE single dark street in Tres Ritos, Richel trotted his lathered horse. He kept his hat pulled low over his eyes. He hoped for success by the very boldness of his actions. Little would Durango Duke or Stoy expect Tod to return to town. If those two worthies had started a search for him it would likely be out in the brush.

Past the small 'dobe homes that flanked the street, Tod rode toward the false-fronted buildings in the center of town. If Rawhide Moore was still in Tres Ritos he would be in one of two places: the *Border House Saloon* or the General Merchandise Store buying supplies as Helen had said. Both places were still open, the windows yellow with light.

At the hitchrack in front of the merchandise store, Tod pulled in beside two other saddled ponies. Here in the deep shadows of the buildings his slitted eyes close-scanned the deserted street. Directly across from him was the *Border House*. Maudlin whiskey talk filtered out into the quiet night. Tod could not see inside the merchan-

dise store where he sat motionless astride his horse. But something told him Rawhide Moore was across the street at the saloon taking his last drink.

Tod started to wheel his horse about. Nerve-prickling uneasiness swept over him. He should have waited at the edge of town for Moore, braced him there. This ride into town was only asking for further trouble.

"Hey! What the—?"

Tod spun about in the saddle just as the door of the store burst open. The stab of his right hand gunward froze. Out of the door ran big Stoy, a sixgun in his fist, his eyes wide with amazement.

"You got gall, Tod!" he boomed. "Keep them hookers up! You ain't goin' on no drive with Rawhide now, brother. I just heerd about you killin' Pinky Avers in cold blood!"

Tod had kneed his horse about facing the lawman. His mind raced for a way out. Then out of the door of the store ran one of Stoy's deputies, a weasel-faced killer whose trembling bony hands gripped two guns. He stopped at Stoy's side, panting, staring, at Tod Richel like a man who refused to believe his eyes.

"Cripes!" he croaked. "That's guts! Kill a man, then ride right back into town an'—"

"Shut up, Tug!" Stoy boomed. Then he grinned malignantly at his prisoner. "Climb down off yore nag easy like, Tod," he gloated, "Yo're goin' to the juzgado."

"I'd rather just sit here," Tod taunted, stalling for time.

"Git down!" Stoy thundered. "Git down or I'll pull yuh down an' slap another charge agin yuh for resistin' arrest."

"One more charge wouldn't matter, I reckon," grinned Tod.

Snarling a curse, big Stoy lunged forward, left hand clawing for Tod's lifted arm. Tod moved—like lightning. His spurs jabbed back. Squealing, his bronc leaped forward. Howling in pained surprise, Stoy went down beneath chopping hoofs. His gun roared into the dust. Tug, the little deputy, screamed, the two guns in his hands blasting flames. Lead plucked at Tod's jacket. In a slithering, fast movement his gun came into his hands. Now it was barking, spitting flame that lanced through the shadows at the deputy who crumpled and went down, dead before he hit the ground.

IT WAS ALL over in a second. And Tod Richel bending over the withers of his horse, was roaring down the moonlit street. He hipped around, fired once over the heads of the men who were pouring out of the saloon. In that fleeting second he saw Stoy back there stagger to his feet. Saw the guns in the big lawman's hands spew. Other guns bellowed in chorus.

Lead whistled eerily past Tod's head, bit into the dust around him. He felt a thrill of thankfulness that he had escaped from that trap alive. Ahead lay the security of the gloom-spawned range. Then—a deadly, jarring shock almost toppled him from the back of his racing horse. He bit back a cry as hot pain stabbed into his shoulder. He felt his strength ooze away. The gun dropped from his numbing fingers. A sticky warmth flowed down his chest. His senses reeled.

Clutching the kak horn for support, Tod gritted his teeth, closed his eyes, fighting desperately to retain the spark of consciousness. The blackness that swirled about him seemed to be clutching at him, drawing him into a vortex. Pain and nausea throbbed through his aching body in exact rhythm to the beat of his pony's hoofs. The night wind whipped against his feverish cheeks. His ears roared.

Then Tod ceased to feel pain. Thirst burned at his vitals. In the dancing black shadows before his eyes he

thought he saw Ase beckoning to him. Ase, and there was blood on his shirt front. Tod tried to shake off the image. Ase was dead! Then he saw the spiteful image of a big Mexican—Pancho Villa. Tod had seen his pictures in the El Paso papers. And now that man of Mexico, the most feared, hated, loved man in all the south country, was before him. Villa was mocking him, laughing, and in his huge hands were two smoking guns.

Tod thought he was cursing. Then he was laughing. The image of Helen Moore appeared before him. Helen in all her alluring loveliness, her arms outstretched in appeal.

Into the rough, arroyo-cut sand-hills of the tierra-baja Tod Richel's leg-weary horse carried him. During lucid periods, Tod wondered where he was and how long he had been clinging to the saddle. Vainly he tried to pierce the blinding haze before his eyes in an effort to glimpse the willowy bosque that edged the Rio Grande.

Tod's thoughts wandered. Deviling hallucinations came only to fade into nothingness, then return. Tod vaguely knew death was stalking his trail. Laughing, cursing sobbing, afire with fever, he rode on, jarring to the motion of his jogging horse.

"Villa!" he croaked. "I'll get you..."

His vow to Ase stayed with him longest. Then he felt himself falling...falling. But before he struck the ground and unconsciousness enveloped him, he knew that his thirsty horse had carried him to the river.

Then Tod's first impression was of a hovering black face, gleaming white teeth. Big Whopper Jackson was over him, talking to him, pouring fiery whiskey down his parched throat.

"By the Lawd, Tod, I found yuh. Hell's poppin' an' the devil's on de loose..."

Tod sighed as Whopper's words faded into a blur of sound.

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RICHEL BLINKED open his eyes into a world of suffocating heat. As his brain began to clear he was first conscious of pain in his wracked body. He was lying, bandaged, flat on his back on a smelly stack of blankets. Three feet above his head was a faded wagon tarp that broke the glare of the hot morning sun. From off in the distance came the moaning, the muffled tromping sound of a restless trail herd. Then above the other sounds struck the harsh, annoyed voice of Rawhide Moore.

"Listen, Stoy!" Moore barked. "Anyhow, seems like yo're kinda stretchin' yore powers—ridin' over here into Chihuahua huntin' for him."

"I'm takin the law into my own hands now, Rawhide," boomed the heavy voice of Bart Stoy. "To hell with what they say about us crossin' the Line. I'm here, ain't I?—an' they's three of my men with me. If yo're hidin' Tod Richel yuh'd best turn him over. I been good to you, Rawhide, lettin' yuh cross the river when my eyes was closed."

"I figgers he done the State o' Texas a good turn by beefin' that sneakin' little killer yuh called yore depitty," blazed old Moore. "Now you an' yore three law-hounds git back across the river."

Stoy swore. One of his men cut him short.

"There's Jackson toolin' the hoodlum wagon, Stoy. I betcha Richel's in there!"

"That hoodlum wagon's full of supplies we couldn't tote in a pack spread," Moore fired belligerently. "An' by the spittin' flames of hell you

go pokin' 'round in there, messin' things up an' I'll gut-shoot yuh!"

Stoy had calmed. "All right, Rawhide," he soothed. "We'll take yore word for it, I reckon. But we'll cut Richel's sign again an' when we do we'll git him if it takes a year. Keep yore chin wiped off an' good luck on the drive. Adios!"

The beat of four horses' hoofs faded away in the brush, heading for the river. Lying tense on the blankets, Tod heard Rawhide grumble a curse to some of his men. Then from the seat of the wagon came a blatant shrill voice that brought a grin to Tod's bloodless lips.

"Up an' sta't poundin' hoofs, yuh long-eared sons o' hell! Sta't tossin' them laigs. We got a hundred miles o' sun an' brush an' horned toads 'tween us an' dem starvin' brown boys dat are wantin' dis heah beef. Hi ya!"

Big Whopper Jackson was tooling the wagon on Rawhide Moore's treacherous drive into the Land of Manana. The jolting wagon bumped over the sandy ground. Cows moaned and horns clacked. Greasewood and thorny mesquite went down, crackling under crushing hoofs of the herd. Cowboys yipped and cursed. Wheels of the wagon groaned, and above it all, rose Whopper Jackson's jubilant voice in ribald range song as they rolled deeper into the forbidden land of the south. Tod dropped off into a troublesome sleep.

WHEN HE awoke, Rawhide Moore was bending over him, spooning broth past his swollen lips. From outside came the plaintive sounds of the bedded herd. Sounds of men riding up to the Dutch oven and the clatter of pots and pans. Out there Whopper was feeding the men. It was sunset—and hot.

"How yuh feelin', son?" Rawhide queried anxiously.

"Like hell, Rawhide."

"Which same I figgered, Tod, with that hole through yore shoulder. Me'n Whopper been watchin' yuh. If yuh hadn't come 'round perty soon I was goin' into Los Lamentos for a Mexican saw-bones. Only about twenty-five miles from there now."

Tod felt new strength surge through him from the hot beef broth. But his bloodshot eyes clouded with worry.

"I'm afraid yo're makin' a mistake, Rawhide," he muttered weakly. "I'm afraid yuh'll never get through with these cows."

The oldster tried to shake off Tod's apprehension with a grin. "I know yuh've had enough to booger anyone, Tod," he wagged his head doggedly. "I heerd about Villa an' his band raidin' yore place. Just can't figger why they'd bother with yore little herd. Seems like that damned greaser has a crow to pick with us fellers back there around Tres Ritos."

"I'm thinkin' of—of Helen now, Rawhide," said Tod softly. "Thinkin' of all yuh've got at stake."

"Shore, I know, son," fretted the old cowman. "I'm gamblin' everything I got on this drive. You see, Villa had cleaned this whole state of beef. Carranza troops is hollerin' their heads off for cows an' willin' to pay any price for 'em. They're camped just this side of Ahumada. I plan to travel fast, get their gold for the herd, an' high-tail it back. Stoy said I could make it. He—"

"Damn Stoy!"

"Shore, I know yuh don't like him, son. Mebby he ain't all that we expect in a man. Mebby he has been a little too friendly with Helen, but I'm overlookin' that. Now promise me yuh'll forgit him. Promise me yuh'll hurry an' git well an' lend me a hand."

"I—I promise," whispered Tod, "for Helen's sake an' yore's. I got two chores to do in this life—help you through with this drive—an' kill Pancho Villa!"

Rawhide's faded eyes squinted with

concern. "Kinda bitin' off a big chaw, ain't yuh, son?"

Tod tried to say more, but sleep tugged at his senses and he fell back wearily on the blankets.

TIRESOME days followed for Tod Richel. Long, hot, weary days while he tossed fitfully on the blankets, his cheeks flushed with fever and his thoughts torturing him. And always there was Rawhide Moore beside him at meal time, bringing him the choice of all the foods that Whopper had prepared. On those frequent visits the old cowman would try to cheer Tod with encouraging news of how few cattle they were losing and the fact they were having no trouble making it from water-hole to water-hole.

"You was just boogery, son," Rawhide would grin. "We'll soon be there. Only about sixty miles as the crow flies."

Then it was fifty. Then forty. Each long hot day brought the gaunt herd closer to its destination. But each time Rawhide came to see Tod he looked more worn, more jumpy. Tod began to notice the oldster's hand was unsteady.

On, ever on, into the sandy desert wastes of the south. Across the haze-shrouded Diablo Desert where bones lay bleached in the blistering sun and lizards scurried to the scant shade of cactus. Whopper singing, his eyes rolling in their sockets, talking to his beloved snake's head. Men cursing, sweating, see-sawing their ponies after the drags. Cows with tongues lolling from their mouths, eyes red as pools of fire. Heat, like the fires of hell, beating down unmercifully on the men and the cows. Everywhere was sand. Hot sand, where ocatilla stretched its spiny fingers up into the white sky as if in supplication for the sins of men.

Night guards and running shifts. Men's nerves on edge. Men with shifty, bloodshot eyes and quick tempers, whose speech was clipped, profane. Men whose sun-blackened hands hovered forever near the black butts of their low-slung guns. Hot nights. Old Rawhide riding point, swearing like a mule-skinner, but asking of no man what he wouldn't do himself.

Hell? It lies south of the Line, in that endless wasteland between the sluggish flow of the Rio Grande and the cool blue peaks of the Huerachic Mountains, a hundred miles south. Diablo Desert mestizos call it, and ride far out of their way to avoid it. An endless, rolling expanse with hazy peaks of the mountains looming up miles and miles away as if to taunt the men who defy that desert. To the east lies the shallow Rio Chonchos.

Dust, white dust that becomes gritty with sweat, filtered into the wagon where Tod rode. He choked and coughed. He heard the men outside cough in the dust that rose into the cloudless sky from beneath the hoofs of the herd.

Unable to stand the inactivity longer, Tod climbed over the blankets and saddles that were dumped into the wagon all about him. He gritted his teeth against the pain of his wound. The fresh bandages that Rawhide had been putting on his shoulder each day hampered his progress. Finally he pushed aside the canvas flap and crawled up into the seat with Whopper.

"Lawdy, yuh-all's lookin' swell, Tod.

Tod knew the man was lying. He knew he looked like a ghost. His fleshless hands told him of the weight the fever had taken from him. He was so weak he could hardly sit up. "How is everything, Whopper?"

Fear flicked into Whopper's eyes. He tried to hide it, but failed. His white teeth flashed in a forced reassuring grin.

"Sho' now, boy, don't yuh worry. Everything's just like the doctor ordered. Yuh best git back there an' take her easy, Tod."

Tod told him he was going to stay on his feet from now on. Rawhide needed him. Tod had heard whisperings behind Rawhide's back that convinced him the men were getting hard to handle. Insolent, sneering remarks that hinted of ugliness.

"How many days I been back there, in the wagon, Whopper?"

"Fo'."

They fell silent. Tod squinted ahead through the dust at the bobbing backs of the gaunt cattle. Rawhide was riding point, half a dozen of the men riding wing and drag. A quarter mile behind the wagon, Tod sighted the dust of the remuda being jiggered along by a man he had heard called "Slim."

WHOPPER fidgeted, mopped the sweat from his face. He kept slapping the ribbons across the mules' backs. "Don't guess I eveh told yuh how I lost de lobe o' my right ear, did I, Tod?" he called, trying to be cheerful.

Tod turned from his thoughts. He looked at the man's lobeless right ear. So accustomed had Tod become to the lower tip of Whopper's ear being gone that he never thought of it any more. He had heard the story a dozen times how Whopper had lost that ear. But now he welcomed the chance to forget his thoughts.

"I'd forgotten it, Whopper."

"Happened like this, Tod. See, it was down in Sonora where some boys told me I'd find some gold. Well, suh, I didn't find no gold, no suh. So yuh knows what I done? I'd go out snake huntin' an' I'd catch them boogers by they tails. Yas, suh, catch 'em by they tails. I'd flip 'em like yuh do a whip. Yuh know what would happen? They haids would come off, just like that. That's what would happen to 'em. They haids would come off an' fall in the sand. It'd kill 'em just like that.

"But my ear. Yuh wanted to hear how I lost my ear, didn't yuh? Well, suh, I caught one one day an' I flipped him, I did, an' his haid come off all right. It come off that wigglin' snake's body an' grabbed me by the tip of the ear. An' there it hung with its teeth sunk into the lobe of my ear. An the only way I could make that snake let go was to cut off my ear. That's what I done. Cut off my ear.

"Yuh know I always figgered that snake was tryin' to tell me something. So I saved him. That there snake haid I carry aroun' an' listen to is the snake that bit me on the ear. An' yuh know, Tod—" Whopper's voice dropped to an awesome whisper— "the ol' snake's haid been whisperin' all day o' —death!"

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THAT NIGHT at a foul-smelling little waterhole, Tod Richel had his first meal with the trail crew. Rawhide Moore introduced him all around, starting with his segundo, Hank Weaver.

Weaver was built like a rail. Tall, bearded he had fiery red eyes and a surly twist to his thin lips that was meant for a smile. He placed a limp hand in Tod's palm.

"Glad to meetcha," he said tonelessly.

Killer! Tod saw it in the man's eyes. He saw it in the way Weaver's long bony arms hung limply down near the guns at his thighs. And the other men whom Tod met one by one were of the same brand. Men with tied-down guns and shifty eyes who couldn't meet Tod's steady gaze, and who seemed anxious to get back to the fire and fill up their plates with beans and cornbread.

Tod tried to hide the trembling of his

body. With a plate of beans in one hand and a steaming hot tin-cup of black coffee he returned to the wagon and sat down. He knew Rawhide had explained to these men why he was along. And further, Tod knew these men were on Durango Duke's payroll. But if these men had been sent down here on the drive by Durango Duke to cause Rawhide trouble why had they delayed throwing their cards on the table?

Tod ate slowly, watching the cocktail guard approach camp on tuckered horses. Bearded men of the same stamp as Hank Weaver. Then Tod looked up as Rawhide clumped up beside him and sat down.

"Quit worryin', Tod," he bridled, kindly.

"I'm not worryin', Rawhide."

"They're good boys," Rawhide said quietly. "Just hard as hell. Duke said they was. But they're the kind we'll need if somebody jumps us. I'll clean up, Tod, if we get through the next two days. We'll be there. I gotta make it, son! I got to so's I can leave Helen well heeled. You sabe how she is—wants nothin' but the best which she deserves. Needless for me to say I'm right proud she's promised to be yore missus. Want yuh to always—always care for her, son...."

"You know I will, Rawhide."

The oldster's appeal touched Tod Richel. Old Rawhide had always been more like a father to him and Ase than just a friend. A pitiful figure the oldster was in a way. Warped and bowlegged, with a slight curvature of the spine as a result of an injury caused by an outlaw horse years ago, Rawhide looked wholly incapable of the task ahead.

"I owe yuh a lot, Rawhide," Tod murmured.

"You owe me nothin', son," grunted the oldster. Then his voice dropped. "Speakin' of owin' reminds me of money, Tod. You had a belt with eight thousand in bills tucked into it. I wouldn't say too much about it to these gents," he warned softly.

"I won't," said Tod thoughtfully.

IT WAS THE next night that Tod, Rawhide, Hank Weaver and two other men stood the first guard. Though still shaky and weak, Tod had ignored Rawhide's orders that he take it easy. Tod had ridden his horse most of the day.

The night was clear, sultry hot and quiet. The cattle, dead on their feet from the forced march of the day, milled restlessly for want of water. Horns clacked. Moon-fog pressed down over the Mexican desert, darkening the stubby clumps of brush and making the moaning herd look like a writhing black sea.

Far off through the night to the south rose the dim, serrated peaks of the Huerachics with their promise of water and relief from the heat. Somewhere out in the brush a coyote howled mournfully, its dismal cry stiffening Tod in the kak as he slowy circled the herd beside Rawhide.

"Be there tomorror, by hell!" Rawhide muttered tightly.

"Keep yore eyes peeled, Rawhide."

The old cowman laughed uneasily. During the five days of the drive not a sign of a Mexican renegade had been cut. Twice they had spotted staring paisano goat herders in the distance, but that was all. They had circled Los Lamentos, one of the men riding into the little Mexican settlement for tobacco and beans. The man had brought the supplies back—and some tequila which he made no attempt to conceal.

It was the actions of the men that had aroused suspicions in Tod. Often drunk the past two days, they had fought among themselves. Their nerves were on edge. Often Tod had found them in whispering groups. And when he had passed them their talk stopped. They hated him, Tod knew. As far as

they were concerned he might as well have been stricken with leprosy. And to Rawhide's orders they had assumed a smirking indifference, answering the oldster when occasion demanded with a surly grunt.

NOW AS HE rode, Tod Richel hearkened to the threat that rode the stifling night breeze. Some uncanny sixth sense warned him of danger. Yet everything was calm. Too calm. And Tod wondered suddenly if his nerves weren't getting the upperhand. After all, outside of the sulking, muttering boorishness among the men he had not a thing to tie to. Not a thing to prove them disloyal, or that they were playing a treacherous game which Durango Duke had outlined for them....

Tod recalled being awakened last night in the dead of night by the hoarse whispering of Whopper Jackson.

"Trubble, Tod," he had breathed. In one hand he caressed the mummified snake's head. His knife gleamed in the other hand. "Ol' booger ain't lied to me yet. It's comin'. It's comin'. I feel it...."

Speaking guardedly, Tod had tried to allay Whopper's fears. But he had slept fitfully the remainder of the night. Now as he turned the guard over to another rider and headed back toward camp, Whopper's warning beat into his ears.

Tod couldn't sleep. There in the wagon he rolled and tossed on the blankets, the dreadful premonition of danger sawing at his nerves. He lay listening to the throbbing silence of the hot Mexican night. The camp-fire near the wagon had long since died.

Off in the distance a new sound struck through the silence; the plaintive moaning of the herd, suddenly aroused. Tod tensed, raised up and began pulling on his boots. Gun in hand, he climbed quickly out of the wagon. He froze, a chilling fear seizing him. The blanket rolls about the deadened fire where the men had been sleeping when he had come in off guard were empty! Not a soul was in sight!

Richel's slitted eyes probed the darkness in the direction of the herd. Out there he glimpsed the furtive stirring of figures. Men on horses, moving, like black wraiths in the night.

Tod ran for his horse. Only an hour ago he had picketed the animal close to the wagon. His horse was gone! Then—it happened! Like the roar of mighty wind, hoof-thunder filled the night. Riders, shrilling crazy Mexican yells, rocketed out of a dry wash a hundred years from camp and bore down on the restless herd. Guns flamed. Those riders roared past the wagon where Tod crouched, flipping the hammers of his two guns.

But Tod might as well have been shooting at phantoms. Lead whined abut his own head, smacked into the sides of the wagon. He cursed through clenched teeth at his own helplessness, his heart thumping with hate.

"Rawhide!" he yelled. "Whopper!"

HIS VOICE was lost in the din. Now the blurry shapes of the riders merged into the night as they bore down on the herd. In a second the cattle were on their feet, a thundering, bawling juggernaut of hoof and horn, smashing through the brush like a tidal wave that no human force could stop.

Tod ran blindly through the black brush to where the herd had been bedded down when the attack came. Now the gunfire and the thunderous roll of hoof-beats began fading in the distance. The attack was over as suddenly as it had begun. Like lightning those Mexicans had struck. Now they were gone. Rawhide's men were nowhere about. Whopper had disappeared as if snatched from the face of the earth.

It dawned on Tod that he had heard no shots from the defenders save his own. He stood in the trampled brush where the herd had been only a few minutes ago. He recalled the empty blankets of the men. What did that mean? Had they discovered the skulking Mexicans before the attack, and deserted? But what had become of Rawhide and Whopper, whose loyalty could not be questioned? One thing was certain to Tod. Those two men wouldn't run from anything!

Sweat beaded Richel's pallid face. His broad shoulders slumped with despair. But his eyes blazed with hate.

"Rawhide!" he called. "Whopper!"

Only silence greeted him. Then from far off across the dark brush the faintest hint of a yell greeted him. It came like an echo to his call. A mocking echo.

"Viva Villa!"

It drifted back through the night from the last of the raiders. It seemed to linger in the dusty air. Then a new sound stung Tod's ears. Off to his right in a thicket of guayule came a low groan.

GUN STILL in his hand, Tod Richel ran through the brush. He found old Rawhide lying in the sand. A stab of pain struck at Tod's heart as he knelt down beside the broken body of the old cowman. There was a dazed look in the oldster's eyes. As Tod lifted his head up into his arms, Rawhide gasped for breath. The front of his blood-smeared flannel shirt rose and fell.

"He—he got me—son—"

"Who, Rawhide? Who done it? What happened?"

"Villa!" The old cowman's eyes fluttered and a crooked tired smile came to his lips.

"Take her easy, Rawhide," Tod choked. "Mebby we—"

Rawhide's grizzled head shook weakly. "I'm—I'm through, son," he breathed. The words seemed to make a bcbbling sound in his lungs. "Slippin' fast—Tod. Just want you—to know—so yuh can—tell Helen. I shoulda listened.... Too bull-headed, I guess. Go back—to God's country, son. Will yuh?"

"Yes, Rawhide."

"Swear it!"

"I swear, Rawhide—after I kill Villa!"

WITH THAT last spark of life, Rawhide must have seen the futility of arguing. His voice grew weaker.

"You'll just be—askin' for death, son. It was Villa—all right. They came up—quick. Our men—I couldn't find them any place. Whopper— I seen him ride right into the face of Villa's fire. They musta got Whopper."

"Easy, Rawhide."

Tod Richel wasn't ashamed of the tears that scalded his eyes. Through a blur he saw the oldster's pain-pinched face in front of him. He tried to make it easier for Rawhide to breathe.

"I'll—I'll rest easier—knowin' yuh'll take care of Helen—son. Just forgit—Villa. Go back—start anew—"

His words faded into a sigh that sounded like the soft flutter of wings. His chilled hand, clutching Tod's fingers stiffened. Rawhide Moore's eyes closed. Rawhide had gone to the Great Spread beyond, dying with his boots on, fighting like hell for what was his, according to the code of the Big Bend.

And there on his knees beside the oldster's stiffening form knelt Tod Richel, his eyes closed and his face a stiff hard mask. How long he remained there he couldn't have told. It must have been hours. He didn't feel the chill of the early dawn.

"God," he whispered hoarsely. "Help me to right two wrongs."

Then he rose tiredly to his feet. He

carried the body of the old cowman back to the wagon in his arms as if his burden were but a child.

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HE BURIED Rawhide's blanket-wrapped body on a brushy scarp close to camp. He placed rocks over the mound and made a cross from wagon boards. In the flushed light of dawn he worked like a man whose senses have been dulled by tragedy.

No words of eulogy were spoken over the grave. The hot morning sun peeped over the eastern rim of the mountains and beat down on the tall motionless figure of Richel as he stood beside the grave.

Then he turned, strode back to camp. There was a new light in Tod's red-rimmed eyes. Killer's light. For an hour or more he searched through the grayish green guayule and mesquite that cluttered the flat sandy basin of the camp. Only trampled brush and sand greeted him, where hundreds of hoofs had churned the ground only a few hours ago. The herd had stampeded into the rolling sand-hills to the south. Not a single body of the attackers did Tod find. Whopper had vanished as completely as the darkness of the night.

It puzzled him. Only one body had been found—Rawhide's. The Circle-E gunhands had disappeared like the morning mist, leaving no trace behind them. Durango Duke's assurance that these picked gunfighters would stand off any attack had meant nothing. Almost within sight of their destination, Villa and a handful of renegades had struck with the usual well-timed precision and sureness. And Durango Duke's two-bit gunhands had fled to the brush like jack rabbits, without firing a shot.

Hate seared into Tod's soul at these bitter reflections. He thought of Helen Moore, wincing when he considered how the loss would affect her.

From the wagon, Tod got a blanket, cartridges and some food. For another hour or more he searched through the brushy dry washes for his horse. He found where the remuda had been the night before. But even the horse jingler and the mounts had disappeared.

Toward noon, Tod came upon his horse nibbling at some brush in a rocky arroyo. He dabbed a rope over the animal and returned to the camp site. Then with his blanket roll behind the cantle of his saddle he rode north along the back trail.

Tod didn't stop to eat. Occasionally he took sparing sips from his canteen. Twice during the long hot afternoon he halted enough to allow his sweaty horse to drink water from his hat.

Then he pushed on. Ever onward into the wasteland of cactus and brush and sand. Not a sign of life did Tod see. Only the lizards that slithered through the scorching sand. Once he passed a coiled rattler that lay in the scant shade of a yucca plant. Tod's eyes, bloodshot from the glaring sun, kept staring straight ahead through the swirling heat waves like a man in a dream.

SUDDENLY Tod started. He realized that he was no longer following the hoof prints of the trail herd over the back trail. He had cut their sign; then he had lost it. The whispering, drifting sand had obliterated any marks the cattle had made.

Toward evening, Tod halted near a sandy butte in the desert. Too tired to eat, he lifted the rig from his horse, tethered the animal close by, then

flopped down on his blanket in the sand. It seemed as if he had hardly closed his eyes until the hot morning sun awakened him. He pulled himself to his feet. His throat was parched and he was hungry.

He sipped of the water in his canteen and poured what was left out into his hat for his horse. Then as he mounted again and pushed on he nibbled at some jerky he had brought along.

Blinded by the glare, Tod closed his eyes for a time. He listened to the slush of his bronc's faltering steps in the dripping sand. Another step and then another. It sounded crazy. Tod wanted to laugh. Yet no sound came past his dry lips. He thought of a Mexican bandit whose name was Pancho Villa. A Mexican whose cutthroat horde had raided his ranch and had killed Ase. That seemed years ago to Tod somehow—Ase's death. Then they had killed Rawhide Moore, brought bankruptcy to Helen....

Hate! It does strange things to men's minds. It plays havoc with a man's reason. It carries a man on, gives him superhuman strength to accomplish an end that becomes a mania.

So it was with Tod Richel. Hate was carrying him on. It made his eyes burn like red hot coals. He had a man to kill before he could return to Helen Moore.

Ahead through the dancing heat devils, Tod's eyes clung to the cool, distant blue peaks. His left fist dropped the slack reins and rose tremblingly skyward.

"I'll get him!" he croaked. "I'll get Villa. He killed Ase an' Rawhide."

The fiery ball that was the sun dropped in the west. Twilight came suddenly, as it does on the desert. It daubed the distant peaks a purplish hue and lengthened the shadows on the sand.

Tod hardly knew when his bronc stumbled into the little Mexican settlement. There were goats nibbling at garbage in the dusty street in front of the doorways of the squalid 'dobe huts. Vaguely, Tod saw the men staring incredulously at him; and he heard the raucous-voiced old women in black shawls come to the open doorways and shrill warnings to their barefoot kids.

At a log trough in the middle of the dusty street, Tod watered his horse. He swayed a little in the kak each time he lifted the horse's head to rest between swigs. From the huts the tawny-skinned peons watched curiously. Then from one of the doorways a native approached Tod with a gourd of water. He said something in Spanish. Tod drank from the gourd. The water refreshed him, cooled the feverish fires that burned within him.

"Gracias," said Tod.

"*Muerto,*" whispered the Mexican. "*Madre de Dios, Senor....* You are dying for want of food and water. You have ridden in from the Desert of the Devils where white men cannot live."

THE SHRIVELED old peon looked into Tod Richel's eyes. He shrank back, staring up at Tod in awe.

"What town is this, my old one?" Tod asked in Spanish. "I was riding for the Rio and for Tres Ritos just north—"

The old Mexican stared in wonder. "By the Virgin, Senor," he breathed. "You are in Lucero. You are lost."

"I'm hunting Pancho Villa," said Tod.

"Villa!" whispered the Mexican. His soul-weary eyes widened in their black sockets. He whispered the name again half prayerfully, half fearfully. Then he shrugged. "That we do not know, Senor. Dios, the great Villa is here—there—everywhere. *Quien sabe?* He is— Who knows—"

"Where is Villa?"

Something about Tod's rasping voice made the peon's eyes widen even more. He looked up into the muzzle of a gun that had suddenly appeared in Tod's fist.

"I thank you for what you have done, compadre," Tod said softly in the native tongue. "I do not wish trouble. But where is Villa?"

"I cannot say, Senor. Trienta-tres kilos to the south lies the ciudad of Charcos. Ask there—or in Guadalupe. Maybe you can learn exactly in Juarez. It is not far."

The Mexican did not know where General Villa was. Holstering his gun, Tod rode on. Haggard-eyed and dusty he jogged on relentlessly to the north. He knew where he was now, at least. Thirty-three miles ahead across the endless expanse of sun-dried brush lay the little Mexican settlement of Charcos. Beyond that lay Guadalupe on the sandy banks of the Rio Grande. Farther up the river was Juarez, and across from it El Paso—"The Pass."

Late that night, Tod again stopped beside a stagnant water-hole. After caring for his jaded horse he nibbled at the hard biscuits and sucked juice from the dried meat. Then he smoked and slept. At dawn he saddled and pushed on.

Tod never did understand how he missed the town of Guadalupe. Maybe he passed it during the periods when he dozed in the saddle. The next he knew he saw the river bosque and the sluggish Rio Grande a half mile to his right. Ahead lay the sun-baked 'dobes of Juarez, and the race-track.

Darkness was just falling when he pulled up in front of a livery stable. A Mexican came running out to meet him. Tod staggered as he dismounted. Fighting off the terrible sleepiness that tugged at his senses, he gave orders to tend his horse, then flopped down on some hay at the rear of the building and closed his eyes.

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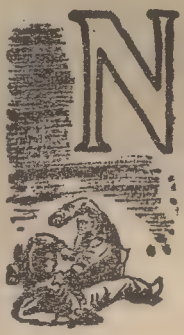

NIGHT. EL PASO—"The Pass" the Mexicans call it. El Paso, once a quiet little Border town basking in the semi-tropical sun, now a hell-roaring metropolis over night. El Paso, the melting pot of the Border, the gateway into the Land of Manana. And now under the mantle of darkness its little business section a teeming mass of humanity, men and women of mixed races and creeds.

In an ultra-modern hotel, women in swishing silk evening gowns mingling in the crowded lobby with debonair gentlemen with flashing eyes and white hands. Conmen. Gun-runners. Gamblers in long-tailed coats, whose slow moving eyes and fast-moving brains missed nothing. Secret service men, smoking cigars, watching. Suntanned cowmen in ten gallon Stetsons with groups of their punchers about them, awkward and self-conscious in their faded denims and scuffed boots. Mexicans of high breeding, exiles of their own country which lay only eight city blocks to the south, whispering with fat-jowled American politicians. Wives of these Mexicans, fat, ugly and expensively dressed, with beautiful daughters.

Ladies with lips too red, winking slyly at bland bellhops. Army officers from Fort Bliss, which lay at the edge of town. Stern looking men in ill-fitting khaki uniforms, hinting to questioning groups that Pancho Villa would be captured within three days. Newspaper men in loud frayed suits conversing here and there and looking secretive.

Here were men and women from all strata of life, intermingling, conversing. Buzzing war talk—and mention of Villa—interpolated with the soft tinkling laughter of the ladies who wore flashing diamonds.

"More troops going over tomorrow, they say. A company of infantry from Indiana. They're going to join a regiment in Parral. They say the Mexicans put up a fight there.

"They'll capture Villa within a week. Just heard tonight they had him pocketed in a canyon near Agua Nueva."

"They'll never get Villa. They don't want him."

"Oh, yeah? What about the Columbus raid? He's going to have to pay for that, isn't he? Biggest outrage since the blowing up of the Maine."

"What about the war in Europe?"

"We won't get into that. Can't."

"Don't make me laugh. That's why the troops are down here. Marking time. Waiting for us to get into the mess across The Pond. This is merely a training ground for our troops."

"Helluva training ground, down here in this heat and sand with rattlesnakes for bedmates. Give me good old Pittsburgh."

"It'll soon be over, then we can go home. Villa's done. He had his fling in Mexico City but he was too dumb to make the most of it. He's just a cutthroat on a looting spree. Carranza is the big shot now. Can't overthrow him. He don't want trouble with the United States. Just Villa, the stupid ox!"

ON AND ON ran the talk there in the hotel lobby in El Paso, the city of eighty thousand population where one hundred thousand militia-men from "back east" were encamped. So it was from Nogales, Arizona, to Brownsville, Texas. Troops! Just kids, most of them, proud of their faded khaki uniforms and on a lark down here in a strange land, blind to the grimmer purpose of their mission. Almost a million men along the sandy stretches of the Border after Villa's hide. A million men after one man!

Outside on the crowded sidewalks a seething line of jostling people going both ways. Drunks, red-faced and staggering, being jostled by an intent, bustling crowd. San Antonio Street stretching out to the east, its feeble street lamps blinking in the night, a bedlam of honking automobiles and horsebackers. El Paso Street running south for eight blocks to the Rio Grande, a gala carnival of chattering, laughing, fighting people gone mad!

War!

Hawkers in the darkened doorways, yelling to the endless stream of sweating humanity. Girls sitting halfway up the gloomy steps of tenement buildings, their faces painted, and stark, starry eyes aglow. Chinese skulking through the shadows of the unlighted alleys. Penny beggars, Mexican hags of infinite years, crouched against the hot 'dobe walls with cupped, scrawny black hands asking for alms, their red, watery eyes pleading.

The farther south one goes on El Paso Street the tougher it becomes. When the sun peeps over the Guadalupes in the morning there'll be a body or two lying in the gutter with the litter. Knifed. Nothing will be done about it. Tomorrow it will be the same. And the next day. It's war!

The wail of a police siren. Nobody turns. Three men are fighting with knives in the street. And the tiny trolley car rumbles past them. More troops marching down the rough paved street. Tramp, tramp, tramp. They're going after Villa! They'll get him. Look at those black boys! Fixed bayonets and in tin hats.

"Hi ya, black boy! Don't mind Villa. Look out for them Mex senoritas."

Boys from Georgia. Black boys,

blacker than the ace of spades, marching down to the International bridge, then into Juarez. Where they're going from there is anybody's guess. *Quien sabe?* Who cares?

TRAMP, TRAMP, tramp, the boys are marching. Lay off the sotol, black boys. It makes you sweat and stink and see red. Don't smoke the marijuana. You'll go nuts in that heat.

"Villa weel be een Mexico Ceety weetheen a month, por Dios!" shouts a hopped peon, flinging his arms into the air. Nobody pays him any heed. They see he's drunk. "Viva Villa! He weel stay there thees time."

"Nuts!" cries an American angrily. "Villa ain't never learned to read an' write. We're gonna bury him face down an' let him dig. The more he digs the nearer home he'll get."

Vice rampant! Hell on a spree! They paid little heed to the guant-faced, burning-eyed cowpuncher who made his way through the crowd to the center of town. Beneath the curled brim of his Stetson his face was burned to a leathery hue. There was a grim set to his square jaw. He had just come out of the moonlit, sandy desert of the south. His cowhide boots were scratched from thorns. His tall, broad-shouldered body reminded one of steel.

"What's your hurry, cowboy?" called a girl from the doorway.

He strode on, the jangle of his spurs lost in the tumult. At a telegraph office in the center of town he sent a message. On the yellow blank he wrote:

Dearest Helen:

Villa killed your father. Bear up, honey. I'll be back soon as I finish my chore.

Tod.

He addressed the message to Miss Helen Moore, Tres Ritos, Texas. The girl behind the counter counted the words and said:

"Villa is a murderer. They'll get him yet."

"Yes," said Tod shortly.

"This'll have to be sent to the nearest railroad station. Then it'll be mailed on to Tres Ritos. All right? Won't get it out till after midnight either. Lots to go out ahead of this one."

Tod told the gum-chewing girl that would be all right. Then he paid for the telegram and went back out on the crowded sidewalk. He headed straight south toward the bridge. He passed the American customs into Juarez. Cantinas on both sides of the street. The smell of enchilladas and tamales and garlic in the hot night air. Scurrying, jabbering Mexicans over here in this "Twin City."

TIRED, DISGUSTED, Tod Richel pushed through the greasy batwing doors of the *Puerta del Sol Cantina*. He blinked through the haze of stale tobacco smoke toward the bar where a perspiring, fat-pouched Mexican was pouring drinks to a crowd of Americans and Mexicans. Near the doorway on some stools three grinning musicos were plucking frantically at the strings of their battered guitars, banging out a popular American dance number. Girls moved through the motley crowd at the bar. Percentage girls with brown skins and spangled short skirts.

No one gave a second glance to Tod as he eased through the crowd toward a rear table. He'd have a drink or two, he decided, then go back to the livery stable, get his horse. He didn't know where he'd go then. Somehow it didn't seem to matter a hell of a lot to Richel.

Halfway to one of the tables at the rear, Tod stopped, stunned! Whopper Jackson sat at one of those tables,

drink in hand, laughing and talking. Across the table from him sat two Mexicans whose shifty dark eyes kept leaving Whopper's sweaty face to dart about the room. Whopper was bareheaded, his kinky black hair wet. He had his back to Tod and his voice rose above the babble.

"Yas, suh," he rumbled drunkenly. "Yuhall can count on Whopper Jackson. Yas, suh. Don't guess I even told yuh, but I'm the best knife-thrower along this heah ribber. . . ."

"Howdy, Whopper."

The man sprang to his feet like a puma at the sound of Tod's voice. Whopper's eyes almost bugged out of their sockets. Then, giving a little cry, he gripped Tod's hand and grinned for joy.

"Tod!" he cried. "Tod! Boy, oh boy, yuh is alive! I knowed I'd find yuh alive."

Whopper's white teeth glistened there in the dismal yellow light that flooded through the smoke haze in that Mexican cantina. He seemed to forget the presence of the two staring Mexicans at the table with him. Then he introduced Tod to them. One of the men was called Gomez; the other man Whopper called Tony.

Tod acknowledged the introduction and sat down. They ordered drinks. He didn't like the shifty eyes of these two. He sensed that Whopper Jackson wasn't as drunk as he had pretended. Something told Tod in those few moments that Whopper was playing a game—a dangerous game. And so were the two Mexicans.

"I've got a lot to tell yuh, Tod, boy," croaked Whopper. "I've—"

"The walls have ears, maybe no?" purred one of the Mexicans, smiling. "Shall we go elsewhere and talk?"

AFTER PAYING for their drinks, the four of them hurried along the street to the livery stable at Tod's suggestion. Here at the rear of the barn among the bales of hay they conversed in low tones in the darkness. As they entered the barn, Tod had dropped a silver coin into the hand of the Mexican liveryman. Now he was sitting in the doorway on a box, his figure a black silhouette against the outer dusk. The low rumble of the town came to their ears like the muted roar of an animal.

"These boys knows where Villa is, Tod," Whopper explained softly. "They wants to join him an' I'm goin' along, too. See, I want to join ol' Pancho. I kin fight, yas, suh!"

There in the darkness, Tod felt the sly pressure of Whopper's booted foot against his ankle. It dawned on him then. Whopper had met up with these two Mexicans, had offered to go with them to join the Villa forces back in the mountains. But Whopper didn't intend to join Villa, Tod guessed. He was just using this means of finding the rebel chieftain, then—

"I see," said Tod casually. "I'll go. What are your plans, amigos?"

The Mexican called Gomez briefly outlined his plan. They would meet here at the livery barn tomorrow night at midnight. It was only a two days' ride to Villa's camp back in the Huerachic Mountains. He warned of the strictest silence of their plans. Juarez was still in the hands of the Carranzistas. But no one could be trusted.

When things were settled, the two Mexicans arose to depart.

"Till midnight tomorrow then, mis amigos," said Gomez.

"Midnight," repeated Richel.

And for many moments after the two Mexicans had gone, big-bodied Whopper stood there in the gloom beside Tod, grinning exultantly.

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DURING the remainder of the night, Tod Richel learned a lot about things that had perplexed him. There in the rear of the livery stable barn he and Whopper talked until rosy streaks of light announced the dawn.

During the Villa attack on Rawhide Moore's herd when all the men had deserted, Whopper had received a head wound that had knocked him out. He proudly displayed the bullet ridge across the top of his head that the kinky black hair didn't entirely cover.

Out there with the herd that night, Whopper had hearkened to the warnings of his snake's head, and when the Villastas had struck Whopper wasn't surprised. He said the trailherders had disappeared as if by magic. Then the bullet got him. He said he didn't know how long he laid out there in the brush. But when he regained consciousness the camp was deserted. Thinking the others had been massacred and carried off, he had trudged across the desert to Lucero, then to Juarez, traveling mostly at night. Only a man of superhuman strength could have made that trip.

Whopper, fired with hate of Villa, had attempted to play a lone hand. Knowing that only through a Mexican could he learn of Villa's whereabouts, he had loafed around this rat-hole of a cantina until he had made the acquaintance of Gomez and Tony.

"See, they think I wants to join Villa," was the way Whopper put it. "But I ain't told the rest. I do want to join that boy just long nuff to cut the fingers off his hands an' then stick the blade in him a few times. What yuh want to do, Tod?"

Tod's face was hard as burnished stone. Only his eyes shone with life.

"I only want one thing in this life now, Whopper," he said slowly. "I want to settle with this Pancho Villa for killin' Ase and Rawhide. What happens to me then doesn't matter, I guess."

"Still got that money with yuh, Tod?" Whopper whispered cautiously.

Tod nodded, imperturbed.

"Boy, don't even dream about that money! They'd kill yuh over heah if they thought yuh even knowed where that much money was."

There in the darkness Tod learned other things. He learned from Whopper, who had been keeping his ear to the ground and pretending to be harmlessly drunk, of Villa's raid on Columbus, New Mexico. Thoroughly aroused at the intervention of the United States, Villa had personally led the remnants of his once powerful Northern Division across the Line to show the gringos he was still a power to be contended with—and was as elusive as the wind.

The United States and President Carranza had revived an old forgotten treaty, which had allowed the armies of either nation to cross the Line at will to give chase to troublesome Kickapoo Indians. Now that treaty was being recognized and the American troops were pouring across the Line ostensibly after Pancho Villa.

WITHOUT results, General Pershing, at the head of the so-called Punitive Expedition, had been sent into the state of Chihuahua. Villa played tag with these troops.

In Mexico City, President Carranza was watching and nervously waiting for the final outcome, while his people along the Border violently protested the invasion of the gringos. In Parral, notwithstanding the efforts of D. Jose de la Luz Herra, the mayor, who tried

to calm the excited populace, school children and women "attacked" the American troops, throwing rocks and mud.

Another incident Whopper told of hearing about was the attack and capture of a company of American negro troops by some indignant Mexican "Loyalists" who disarmed the Americans and marched them back to the Border in their underwear, disgraced. But nothing was ever done about it.

Villa, staging a comeback, had a month ago captured Juarez. Then the American troops across the river in El Paso had mounted their cannon on Mt. Franklin, across the Line on American soil, and had blasted away at Villa's camp near the racetrack, causing Villa to retreat.

Now the great mass of the Mexican people, in sympathy with Villa, were demanding war with the horde of invading gringo troops. They began hating the sight of the familiar khaki-clad figure of the American soldier. In a desperate effort to avert war, President Carranza had sent Minister of War General Obregon to confer with General Hugh L. Scott, Chief of Staff of the American Army, now in El Paso.

Carranza, fearful of another comeback by Pancho Villa, wanted peace with the United States—and Villa buried under six feet of dirt.

NOW, IN JUAREZ, conditions had run amuck. Hate, suspicion and indignation flamed in the eyes of the Mexican inhabitants. American troops had literally taken over their town. Wheedling, disloyal Mexicans were selling beer—and women—to the invaders. Hell was on the loose. Plots and counter-plots were hatched over tequilla bottles behind the 'dobe walls in Juarez. New organizations formed overnight and died the next day when their leaders were stood against the bullet-pocked execution wall at the edge of town and shot down. And back in the hills a dozen different renegade bands of cutthroats were capitalizing upon the chaos in their country.

So it was that Tod Richel learned all of this from Whopper Jackson. It aroused in him disgust. He considered his own chances of settling scores with this famous Pancho Villa when all the American troops failed to get him.

"I guess we'd never heard of all this if we had stayed in Tres Ritos," he said thoughtfully.

"I guess not," murmured Whopper. "They's a lot o' things happenin' down heah that people ain't gonna hear about," he added wisely. "They's mad, Tod. Them white folks an' brown an' black folks....they's all alike. They's all alike. They's mad!"

At dawn, Tod flopped back on the hay and slept during the sweltering heat of the day. Once he awoke to find Whopper missing. How long Jackson was gone he didn't know. When he opened his eyes again it was dark and Whopper was bending over him.

"Midnight,Tod. We'd best git goin'."

"What about the two Mexicans, Whopper?"

Whopper's eyes rolled around uneasily. "We's just goin' by ourselves, Tod."

"What about the two men?"

"Daid, Tod," whispered Whopper. "They was marched out to de wall dis afternoon an' shot daid. I seen 'em."

Through the still black night, two men rode along the rutted trail that led out of Juarez to the south. Like wraiths they loped across the mesas of cactus and brush and sand. There was a strange glint in Richel's red-rimmed eyes; a hard, determined set to his jaw. Whopper's face was like carved ebony. No fear shone in his eyes. He knew what lay ahead. Going after Villa's hide could only mean one end—death! But he was going. When his

time came to die he wanted it to be by the side of Tod Richel.

Morning found them in the desert, haggard and tired. Twice during the night they had stopped to drink and water their horses from the canteen of water they had brought along. Then they had pushed on, doggedly.

Now as they pulled in to a walk, there were many things that Whopper wanted to say but he didn't know how to begin. He wanted to break the silence that ony the slush of their horses' hoofs in the sand disturbed.

"Don't guess I eveh told yuh about my ear, did I, Tod?" he asked solemnly.

"I guess not."

Whopper grinned and fingered the tip of his ear where the lobe was missing. "Happened like this, Tod. See, I was doin' chores for the Bar-X in de Panhandle one summer. One day I was totin' mail out to the boys when that herd seen me an' started to stampede. Well suh, they run right for me an' knocked me off'n that hoss I was ridin'. Knocked me right off an' trompled over me. I got up when they had passed an' got to feelin' o' myself an' I felt this heah lobe o' my ear missin'. That's the way I lost her, Tod. That's just the way she happened. It was all over just like that and there I was with the lobe o' my ear missin'. Them cows' hoofs musta just cut her off. Just cut her off."

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DEEP IN the Huerachic Mountains of Mexico, darkness blanketed a camp of three hundred men. The flickering yellow light from a dozen small campfires revealed flimsy tents, and men, who lounged idly on blankets close by, resting after the man-killing ride of the day through the sweltering sun.

The smell of fried beans and tortillas hung heavily in the still night air. There was the occasional whiff of tequila as one of the men produced a bottle from beneath his saddle blanket and took a long swig of the peppery liquor, sighed and fell back again to doze.

Back in the fringe of darkness from the fires, jaded horses stomped fretfully as they nibbled the greasewood leaves where they were picketed.

Women moved about those fires, busy with their duties of scouring the pots and pans with sand. Wives of the men, were these women. Soldaderas of Villa's revolution. Women with tragic eyes, who cooked for their men and attended their wounds, and when occasion demanded—fought beside their men! Many of these women were waddling and fat, with wrinkled leathery skin. Many of them were young, with full red lips and flashing dark eyes—daughters and sweethearts of these men of the Revolution.

The men? They were Villa's Dorados, his Golden Ones. Men from Hell, they had become known in this stricken country of the South. Six-footers, all. The pick of the manhood of Mexico; most of them graduates of Chapultepec, the West Point of Mexico. They were the remnants of the once powerful Northern Division, General Francisco Villa's own personal bodyguard, who had marched so triumphantly with him into Mexico City only a few short months before.

Three hundred men! Three hundred men who had been through hell—loved, despised, hated by their own people, harried and hounded by the cavalry troops of the United States. Men without a country because they had lost all in an effort to free, from the whip-lash bondage of the wealthy landowners,

their own people—the peons. These Dorados had seen their people tromped unmercifully into the dust of Mexico for no reason other than a desire on the part of the wealthy class to demonstrate their power. They had seen their fathers whipped to death with bullwhips; had seen their mothers tortured and their sisters attacked before their very eyes while they looked on, helplessly bound.

THEY HAD seen death, plenty of it, had these men. Despairing of hope, they had waited for their time to die. In the fields of the haciendados they had slaved, sweated and died a thousand torturous deaths, occasionally closing their eyes to pray to their patron saint for release from this bondage. Then the cut of the overseer's whip would drive them on.

These men were proud of the badges they wore on the breasts of their faded drab uniforms. Inscribed on those badges were the words: *"Escolta del Gral. Villa. Oficial de Ordenes."* These men bore a strange worship for the big man who led them—Francisco Villa. Anyone of them would have died for him. Villa was their savior. Villa, that oddly twisted personality who could laugh and kill and love in one breath.

They had seen Villa the lion. They had seen Villa the simple child who laughed at trivial happenings that most men wouldn't have seen. They had seen this barrel-c h e s t e d, powerful-shouldered man with the flashing brown eyes, roar defamations and curses at a hundred Carranzista prisoners who strutted defiantly before him; and slaughter them himself until the dust ran red and the barrels of his Colts grew hot. Then they'd seen him stand over the grave of a nameless peon who had died from a flogging, his eyes blinded with tears.

These men had seen Villa kill. They had been with him when he had sacrificed a battle in order to ride miles out of his way to take a doctor to a sick baby; or to leave money with a family that was starving.

Such was General Francisco Villa. And such were the men who had remained faithful to him and his creed, even now in defeat. These were the men, garbed in their faded uniforms and crisscross bandoleers, who had once proudly paraded before American army officers in Juarez. These were the remnants of the outfit which, when questioned by General Villa, General Scott of the American army had said: "As a cavalry unit, General Villa, I assure you that I consider it the first in America!"

NOW THERE was an air of hopelessness about them. Occasionally they looked speculatively, sadly toward a singe tent that stood slightly apart from the others. Somewhere off in the rincons a coyote chattered dismaly. Down the line of tents a strumming guitar accompanied by the lilting voice of a girl rose into the night.

Bajo la sombra de las palmeras
Do me juraste eterno amor
Me prometiste que me amarias
Con toda tu alma v tu corazon . . .

On and on the song went, the wistful words drifting into the silence of the night that was only broken by the movements of the busy women and the stamping horses and the coyotes in the rocky ledges above the camp.

Inside the tent that stood apart from the others, a trick-chested, uniformed man sat alone at a makeshift table, studying a map. Something strange about the man's brown eyes. They seemed to bore clear through any object. They were soulful eyes of a dreamer; eyes that could flash in action; eyes that had glinted with a killer's lust. Now they were thoughtful.

The man was Pancho Villa. His uniform was nondescript. He wore a sweat-stained Stetson, the brim turned up in front. Around his thick waist was a cartridge belt and a holstered Frontier model Colt .45.

HERE WAS Pancho Villa, who in 1907 and 1908 was the faithful follower of President Madero during the revolution of 1910. Villa, who was a brigadier and hero during that memorable cavalry charge in Rellano against the Orozco troops, Villa, who was General of Divison, fighting his way to Mexico City to become ruler of his country. And again just plain Villa, defeated in Celaya and Leon. And last, Pancho Villa, the bandit, the man outside the law thus branded by American and Carranza newspapers. Villa, the wolf, the killer.

Something pitiful about Villa now. The spark of hope that he could save his country had nearly died. He rose from the table, strode out into the night. His men lifted their eyes, watched him as he marched stiffbacked and straight down the row of tents. There was something akin to pity in the eyes of the men who watched Villa this night.

Almost in the outer fringe of darkness, a hundred yards from the main camp, Villa stopped in front of another tent. All was dark inside. Villa's eyes slitted. He paused. It was the wary instinct of a hunted animal. The soldado who had been on guard only an hour before was nowhere in sight.

Frowning, Villa stepped into the tent. In the gloom, objects were barely discernible in the fluttery, ghostly red light from the fire outside. A figure stirred. Villa tensed, right hand slapping down to the gun at his hip. Then came a voice. A woman's voice, low with resignation.

"It is I, mi General—Estrallita."

Villa's hand dropped from his gunbutt. A slim-waisted girl, her dark tragic eyes shining starkly in the dim light, came up in front of him. Her shoulders slumped in despair. She couldn't have been much over twenty.

"The prisoners are gone, General," she said in Spanish. "I—I released them."

Villa made no move. He looked into the girl's eyes until she made a sobbing sound and her eyes dropped to the ground. A snarl tugged at Villa's lips. When the girl looked up again she saw his tarnished teeth.

"You cut loose the gringo and the black man with him?" Villa asked curiously, a rasping note in his voice. "But the guard?"

Standing stiffly now, the girl pointed to a figure on the ground close to the entrance. Villa's head jerked about on his massive shoulders. He looked down at the guard who lay bound hand and foot. A gag was over his mouth. His eyes blazed with fury. But Villa made no move to release the man. He turned to the girl.

"You did wrong, Estrallita," he said tonelessly.

THE GIRL stood perfectly still, shoulders straightening, a certain recklessness about her. In the darkness her lovely face was framed by a mass of dark hair. She didn't look like a Mexican. Her features were too fair; too much of an up-tilt to her little nose. Her red lips were parted in a weary smile.

"Punish me as you wish, mi General," she said softly.

Villa's dark face hardened. "The past two days you learned to care for this strange gringo with the icy blue eyes, did you not, Little Star?"

"I learned to love him, General," the girl said simply.

She must have known that she would be punished. She had broken the trust Villa had placed in her. This was war! Women die the same as men during wars in Mexico. They think

little of it. They take it with all the stoical calm of their race.

"Little Star," said Villa, a sad, rebuking note creeping into his voice. "Your father was one of my most trusted men. He was one Irish gringo I could trust with my life. Colonel O'Rourke died fighting for our cause. He asked me to care for you as my own child. That I have done. Now by the good Dios you betray me—"

"I ask for no mercy, General," the girl cried. "I only pray to the Virgin Maria for—for his safe return to the Border. Tonight when I brought the two prisoners their food, I also brought them a gun. They called the guard in and bound him. Now they are gone and may the saints..."

The words froze in her throat. Villa jerked taut as if stabbed in the back. A soft voice cut through the gloom. "Just stand still—both of you—!"

Spoken in Spanish. Each word knife-edged, low. From the rear of the tent emerged a tall figure. The ghostly red light glittered on the barrel of the gun in his fist. Beneath the brim of his hat his eyes were feverish with hate. He was grinning—the grin of a dead man. Behind him, through a slit in the tent, eased a huge black figure. He looked like a mighty gorilla whose white eyes were wide.

"Tod!" whispered the girl. "Tod!" She said it like a person who is face to face with a ghost.

IT WAS TOD RICHEL. His heart pounded wildly against his ribs. But outwardly he was like cold steel. That mocking, bleak grin still played over his lips as he looked at the two people who stood tense, there in the gloomy tent in front of him.

"Villa," said Tod, "my one chore in life has been to kill you. It has been since that night you raided a little ranch just west of Tres Ritos over in the Big Bend—and killed my brother. I'm still thinking of the night only ten days ago when you and your greasy cut-throats stole a herd of cattle down near Ahumada—and killed a man who was like a father to me."

Tod's words ran on. Bitter words, vibrant with a hate that had seared his soul. He knew it was the end. Knew that once he poured lead into this big renegade the soldados outside would cut him down. But he didn't care. He would have squared accounts.

And as Richel talked in that low voice. Villa listened, face as expressionless as a graven image. Only curiosity, wonder shone in his eyes. Strange men, these gringos. The girl by Villa's side stood, white-faced, her arms hanging limply down at rer sides. Her lips moved again.

"Tod!" she whispered incredulously. "Tod!"

And behind Richel, Whopper Jackson, the mighty black man, stood, huge shoulders thrown forward in a crouch, a six-gun in one hand, a knife in the other. He just stood there, listening, waiting, his ebony black face shiny with sweat.

"You found the two of us dying of thirst on the desert two days ago, Villa," Tod continued. "You saved our lives. For that I am going to give you a chance. I can't kill you in cold blood. I'm going to drop my gun hand ...count three. Then you'd better go for your gun—cabron!"

"Lawdy... Hurry, Tod..." It was like a ghostly whisper from Whopper. *"One!"*

Tod's first word was a sibilant hiss. His right hand had dropped to his side. He crouched like a puma ready to spring. His eyes were terrible to behold. Still Villa made no move.

"You are a brave man, Senor Richel," said Villa queerly. "But you are a fool."

Tod hesitated saying the count of "two." He hadn't expected this big renegade chieftain to face death so

calmly, Tod had expected Villa, face to face with death, to beg for mercy. Outside, the movements of Villa's men drifted into the tent to them. All Villa would have to do was to call to them. Yet he didn't. He seemed fascinated by this queer gringo who was making accusations against him....

"Two!"

"The ony time I crossed the Border into your country was at Columbus," said Villa quietly. "I raided no ranch near Tres Ritos. I stole no herd nor killed no gringo near Ahumada." He said it like one boy talking to another.

"Tod," sobbed the girl. "Listen—"

"You're lying to save your own stinking hide, Villa!"

VILLA GRINNED. But it wasn't pleasant to see. "It is the truth, gringo. For the past two months we have been near Nacozari, four hundred miles from here."

"Tod—don't—don't—" the girl cried brokenly.

"It is not that I am afraid to die, gringo," smiled Villa. "Dios, no! I just wish to prove you are loco like the others of your race. Then I shall fight you any way you please—with guns or knives."

"Wait, Tod!" the girl pleaded. "I love you! I can't help it. I love you I'll be right back."

Like a man in a daze, Tod stood with the gun hanging from his limp fingers down at his side. He stared after the girl who ran out of the tent. Stared like a man whose mania has driven him on to a futile end. His mind whirled. No one of the three men in the tent moved. On the floor the helpless guard looked like a dead man. The sound of the girl's running feet came to them.

Then the flaps of the tent moved apart. Into the tent stepped a man whose stooped figure was garbed in a black cloak. His hair was white and his eyes were those of a man who lives close to death. He searched the faces of the men who stood like stricken beings, the grotesque light of the flames outside shining through the canvas of the tent upon their strained faces.

"Yes, mi General," the newcomer said calmly.

Villa continued to watch Tod. "Tell this gringo, padre," he said quietly, "where we have been for the past three months. I wish him to know before I kill him."

The priest turned to Richel. "We have been in camp near Nacozari," he said puzzledly.

"He—Tod—thinks we raided his ranch near Tres Ritos, in Texas," cried the girl who had followed the padre into the tent. "Tell him the truth, Father. Tell him!"

Speaking quietly, the padre told exactly of the whereabouts of Villa and his men for the past two months. They had been nowhere near Tres Ritos, nor near Ahumada. What the padre was saying shattered Tod's hopes for vengeance.

"I—I can't believe it!" Tod choked miserably.

"Padres don't lie, Tod," smiled Villa. "Now shall we fight with guns or knives?"

"It doesn't matter," Tod murmured in Spanish. "Nothing matters..."

The padre crossed himself, and the girl rushed forward into Tod's arms.

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STRANGE things happened in Villa's camp that night. Turning his broad back, Villa had strode out of the tent, followed by the wondering padre. For three days, Tod Richel and Whopper Jackson remained in

that tent, seeing only Estrallita who brought them food.

Tod waited patiently, calmly, for their execution. And there was none. Tod had time to think. He didn't think of himself. He thought of the raid on his ranch that night when Ase had been killed. He recalled the attack on the herd. Villa hadn't done it. He was positive now. But who had? Somebody had done it and had branded the blame, conveniently enough, on Villa's men who had been rampaging throughout the state of Chihuahua.

Tod puzzled over the interest Durango Duke, the sleek gambler back in Tres Ritos, had taken in the drive into Mexico. Tod knew Duke was crooked as a snake, and that Sheriff Stoy played into his hands. But they couldn't have been responsible for the raiding!

"I just cain't sabe it, Tod," muttered Whopper, time and again. "What we gonna do now, Tod?"

"I don't know Whopper."

Tod didn't know. He had no plans for the future. He kept trying to put back the shattered pieces of his plans, but failed. He found himself wondering about this strange-acting Mexican girl, called Estrallita O'Rourke.

"You don't look like a Mexican," he told her one day.

She smiled. "I am not," she said in English. "Me—I am half Ireesh, half Spanish. My name ees Estrallita O'Rourke."

TOD WONDERED more about her. He found himself lying on his blanket at night, forgetting what lay ahead and thinking about the loveliness of this girl who had given him a chance for freedom that night. Of nights she came to his tent. While Whopper wandered about the camp, she and Tod sat before the flaps of his tent and talked. The pale Mexican moon shone down on them. The dancing lurid light from the campfires played over their faces.

Tod tried to tell himself that he didn't enjoy her visits and the life he was leading. But he knew he did. There was a fascinating charm about this simple girl. At times when she told of her father's death her brown eyes would become moody and sad. Tod found himself thrilling to her closeness. And as each day passed an indefinable attraction brought them closer together. It was as if they had known one another for years.

Tod learned again to laugh. He learned to love the soft warmth of her voice when she sang to him, there of nights under the Mexican moon. He found himself unconsciously comparing this care-free wild little creature in her faded man's clothing with the dazzling Helen Moore who was so sedate. And, oddly enough, Estrallita measured above the fine qualities of Helen Moore in Tod's estimation.

Estrallita often talked of her father. Tim O'Rourke had drifted into Mexico years ago and had won the love of her mother, a flashing-eyed Spanish girl. They had married and lived happily at the Hacienda Shamrock which had been built for them by Estrallita's grandfather, a wealthy don. Then trouble swept their land. Estrallita's mother had died of pneumonia. Estrallita had been sent to a convent to live with the sisters, while her father, in sympathy with Villa, had joined him.

Tim O'Rourke had been one of Villa's most trusted men. One day he was killed in battle. Estrallita, hearing of his death, had fled from the convent and joined Villa despite his protests.

"Villa is like a father to me," Estrallita said softly. "He has watched over me, protected me. I shall stay with him now until the end. The hacienda

my father left me is in the hands of the despised Carranzistas."

YET TOD could not help thinking of Ase—and Rawhide Moore. The thought of his vow to even the scores with the men who had killed them plagued Tod. His eyes would cloud and his tanned face would harden.

"What is wrong, Tod?" Estrallita would ask anxiously. "Your eyes—they are the eyes of a man who is suffering."

Tod told her all that had happened, and why he had come into Mexico.

"And this girl—you love her, Tod?" she asked simply.

"I guess so," said Tod, wondering.

"She must be beautiful, Tod."

"Not half so beautiful as you, Estrallita," he said frankly.

She gave a little choking laugh, the color creeping into her cheeks.

"You just say that, Tod," she bantered in an attempt to be gay.

"I mean it."

Helen Moore was never mentioned again. The next morning Tod strode into Villa's tent. He stood stiffly before the big Mexican, his steady eyes matching Villa's. Neither man spoke for a full moment.

"I have been a fool, General," said Tod bluntly. He hardly knew why he was saying this. The words just seemed to slip past his lips. "Whopper Jackson and I wish to join you. I can't help but be in sympathy with your cause."

After a time Villa smiled. It was a boyish smile. His tarnished teeth showed beneath his lips. For a fleeting moment his brown eyes softened.

"Sure Tod," he said queerly. That was the only English he knew. He loved to say it. He loved to roll the words about on his tongue, and grin. "Sure Tod."

TOD RICHEL was glad to hear him say that. Then Villa's face grew grim and his eyes narrowed with thought.

"Estrallita told me all about you, Tod," he said simply. "It was because of her that you and your companero were not killed long ago. I welcome you into the Dorados. I need men with guts and guns. You will become a Dorado."

Villa continued, eyes flaming with fires of determination. "They say Villa is done. Done? *Por Dios,* I have not yet begun! I shall be in Mexico City again. We shall give new life and freedom to my people, the peons. We have stayed here resting. Now we are ready to strike again! Tomorrow we ride!"

That night a group of officers were seated in General Villa's tent. Tod was there, watching, listening. Outside the Dorados had retired to their tents and the soladeras, the women, were in their section of camp. There, deep in the Huerachic hills, the remnants of Villa's once powerful Northern Division waited for orders from their beloved leader.

Slowly Villa rose to his feet. For a full moment he said nothing, while his hypnotic eyes studied the face of each man present. Then he said: "Tonight at midnight we ride. Each of you will be given fifty men. You shall enter ciudad Chihuahua from different angles. At dawn we shall meet in the public plaza of the town. Any of you men who are not there when the sun rises shall be executed. That is all."

Such was the way General Villa gave orders.

Those men departed. They knew Villa. They knew further talk was useless. Tomorrow at dawn they would either be at the plaza in Chihuahua City...or they would die. Those men understood that. There were Colonel Juan Vargas, Nicholas Fernandez, they second in command; Emesto Rios, Juan Morga, and others. They were grim-lipped, silent, eager for

action. They went down the line of tents to arouse the soldiers for the night ride.

THEY RODE. Chihuahua City fell from the hands of the Carranzistas. Into town along Zarco Avenue in the dim light of early dawn, screaming, yelling, firing men charged their horses into the center of the amazed town. Men gone mad! Villa had struck! Struck as suddenly as if dropped from the sky. Only the evening before the local newspaper had carried the headlines: "Villa Besieged; Capture predicted in Few Hours." Yet here was Villa, sacking the town.

Rifle fire ripped wide the early silence of the town. Uniformed defenders fled for their lives. From all angles came Los Dorados, converging upon the public plaza, blasting rifles from their hips. Windows of the 'dobe homes flew open. Women with sleepy eyes and old men screamed a welcome to their saviour.

"Viva Villa!"

Carranza soldiers fell into the dust of the street that was fast running red. From hundreds of throats rose the brassy crazy cry of the revolution. Villa's war song!

"La Cucaracha... La Cucaracha..."

Hell on the loose! With those Dorados rode an American cowboy whose name was Tod Richel, thrilling to the lust of battle. Beside him rode a massive black man, yelling like a maniac, a knife in one hand, a six-gun in the other, guiding his horse with his knees. And close behind them in the white dust rode a girl whose eyes flashed and whose hair flew back in the wind leading the other soldaderas who were fighting with their men.

"Viva la Revolución!"

"God bless Villa! He saves us! He saves us!"

It came from doorways, that screaming welcome. From women and children and crippled old men whose eyes were filled with tears. But their cries were lost in the roar of chopping hoofs and the deafening bedlam of blasting guns.

IT WAS ALL over within an hour. And in the public plaza on lathered, trembling horses sat the generals who had been at the conference the night before when they were told they should be there when the dawn came, or die. They were there. Villa was with them, eyes misty with pride and triumph. Close by was Tod, heart pounding like a trip-hammer. And there was Whopper Jackson, panting, grinning, like a man who has won a hard race.

"La Cucaracha...La Cucaracha,
Ya no quiere caminar
Porque no tiene, porque no tiene
Dinero para gastar..."

On and on the verses went. Some in ribald version. It was the cry that was to again sweep the state of Chihuahua. It was to be heard again in Durango and in Sonora. A crazy, meaningless tune that blended with the blast of gun-fire and the thunder of hoofs and the screams of men.

Days grew into months. Tod Richel hardly noticed the passing of time. There were man-killing night rides. Dawn attacks. Ride! Ride! Ride! Battles, where men laughed at death. Men fell from the ranks of the Dorados but a hundred newcomers took their places. Men from the fields, whose fingers were bloody from work. Peons. Men who had never had rifles in their hands, only hoes.

THE MEN from hell! That's what Los Dorados became branded by the frightened wealthy landowners in Mexico. Frenziedly they called to

Mexico City to stop the rampaging of this killer, this cutthroat renegade, Pancho Villa. They yelled their heads off for help to the American troops who were encamped by the thousands along the Rio.

But those American troops were being slowly withdrawn. There was another conflict that was inevitably sucking them into a vortex of war. There was war across The Pond. Khaki-clad American soldiers were being loaded on boats and hurried to Europe to stop the Hun. Americans with new Springfield rifles and the urge to save Democracy. Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!

"Over there... Over there... Oh, the Yanks are coming..."

And down there in the endless sandy wastes of Mexico, Villa's rag-tag army of the Revolution was singing and fighting and dying for a cause they held as right.

"La Cucaracha... La Cucaracha..."

The world gone mad!

Along the Border, legend spoke of a blue-eyed gringo cowboy who rode with Villa's Dorados. They talked about him in cow-camps where men congregate about the fire at night and swap tales. They talked about him in the back country saloons, in addition to the war in Europe. And they also talked about a huge man, black as the ace of spades, who rode at this gringo's side. A man, who rode with a gun in one hand and a razor-edged knife in the other. The whispering cottonwoods down along the Rio told tales, in the eerie gloom of late night, so the mestizos said, of war and strife and death. And those mestizos would cross themselves and whisper a prayer to the Virgin Maria....

Villa sacked Camargo. Came the battle of Enramada and the capture of Jimenez. Then Parral and Horcasitas. General Francisco Murguia, chief commander of the government troops, fought desperately to check the rising tide of revolution. Came the battles of Torreon, Reforma, Cerro de las Mujeres—Women's Hill. Others.

AND SO IT was that Tod Richel had the opportunity to learn from various sources about Villa whom he had come to admire and respect. A bond of understanding, stronger than words, had grown between the two men. A bond of trust and friendship. Tod overlooked the childish eccentricities and bad qualities of General Villa for his good ones, which were overwhelming. Tod saw in Villa a dynamic personality, a man endowed with a righteous urge. A sincere man. A man!

Tod learned in San Juan del Rio, where Villa passed his boyhood, that Villa was christened "Doroteo,"—the son of Agustin Arango and Micaela Arambula. Francisco Villa was just a war name he had assumed. He was born at "Rio Grande," a small ranch located near San Juan.

Villa had been born in poverty. Early he had learned to hate those who wore neckties and polished boots. Those things became associated in Villa's mind with floggings and torture. His first killing was to protect the honor of his sister. It was near Santa Isabel, Durango, that Villa, the boy, returned to the family shack one night from the fields, to find his mother dead, his sister outraged by the son of his employer, the powerful Lopez Negrete, master and owner of human lives in that vicinity. So it was, in learning all this, that Tod got a keener insight to Villa, the man with whom he rode.

One night then a courier rode into Villa's camp. The news he brought changed the course of General Villa's campaign—for the worse. And it was also news that was to vitally affect Tod Richel.

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A DORADO came up to Tod's tent with the news that General Villa wished to see him. When Tod appeared before Villa, he stood stiffly at attention. For a full moment Villa let his keen eyes run over the tall, square-shouldered cowpuncher who stood before him.

Tod's face had darkened to the hue of bark. He was lean, hard. The year he had been with Villa's Dorados had made him look older. It had changed him inside, too. Changed his concepts of people and life and living. His lips were a little tighter. A colder, more thoughtful look in his blue eyes. Tod couldn't have told how he had changed, or why. But Villa was shrewd. He knew. Knew it was a girl whose name was Estrallita O'Rourke.

"You and Tim O'Rourke are the only two gringos I have ever trusted, Tod," said Villa bluntly. "You have made an excellent Dorado." Something prideful the way he said it.

"Thank you, mi General," said Tod quietly.

"Tonight one of my men brought in important news," Villa continued. "Here it is...."

For ten minutes Villa talked in a low voice. He came direct to the point, as he always did. Hacienda Shamrock, Estrallita's former home, he said, was now being occupied by several leading Carranzista officers. They were using the old fortress-like 'dobe building as headquarters. This night he—Villa—was picking a hundred men. They were going to ride to the hacienda, make a surprise attack. It only lay fifteen miles to the south. In capturing those officers it would break the backbone of the opposition. It was Villa's one big chance of winning. Things were beginning to look bad....

"I shall be ready, General," Tod said grimly.

He turned to leave.

"Tod."

"Yes, General?"

"In the year you've been with me you have never learned anything about the men who killed your brother and friend?" Villa asked curiously.

Richel told him he had not.

"You will some day, Tod," said Villa dreamily. "Nothing can stop the will of a man—if that will is strong enough. You'll find the murderer some day."

"I hope so," Tod said slowly, bitterly. Tiny fires of hate came back into his eyes. "When I do I'll kill!"

WHEN TOD got back to his tent he told Whopper of the ride. Grinning with anticipation, Whopper ran out to saddle the two horses. Tod busied himself by stuffing new cartridges into the empty niches of his twin gun-belts. There was a stir behind him. He whirled.

Just inside the tent stood Estrallita O'Rourke. Her lovely face was pale in the darkness. There was a stark, haunted look in her dark eyes.

"I'm afraid, Tod," she whispered tremulously. "I was hid outside Villa's tent. I heard about the ride to the hacienda. I'm afraid, Tod—for you—"

Tod laughed shortly. "You sound like Whopper talking to his snake's head."

"I don't trust the man who brought the news to Villa, that's all. I don't like his eyes."

They stood close to one another, just the two of them, there in the darkness of his tent. Tod thrilled to the beauty of this girl. Estrallita O'Rourke was all that a man could ask for in a woman. She was good and faithful and courageous, respected by every man

in the camp. She was the kind who would go through hell for her man without a whimper.

Estrallita had changed the past year. But the rigors of camp-life and the long hard rides in company with the other women in the outfit had only enhanced her dark beauty. But of late, Tod had noticed she hadn't laughed as much. There had come a haunted look into her eyes. This beautiful wild creature had grown into womanhood and she had changed. Protected and loved by Villa as if she were his own daughter, she saw only what was good in life.

Now as Tod looked down into her soulful eyes he read things he had never seen before. This slim-waisted girl in her mannish garb did something to him. He knew his body was trembling. And he forgot everything—the ride ahead—everything except the presence of Estrallita O'Rourke.

THEN HE took her into his arms. He felt her body quivering. She gave a little sob as his lips met hers.

"I love you, Little Star. Love you! Love you!"

"I love you, Tod!" she cried, sobbing. "I always have."

Tod stepped back. He looked over her head. He didn't want her to see his eyes.

"It's foolish of us talking like this, Estrallita," he muttered bitterly.

"You're thinking about the beautiful lady back in Texas, aren't you, Tod?"

"If I live through this I've got to go back, that's all," Tod said doggedly.

She smiled through her tears. Her lips trembled. "I know, Tod," she said simply.

"I can't fail her," he said hopelessly. "I've failed to keep a vow I made over my brother's dead body. I can't fail her."

"But I'll always love you, Tod. Back in the convent Sister Teresa used to say if you wanted anything the best way to get it was to pray. I've prayed a lot lately, Tod. I've prayed—for you."

All Tod could say was, "Little Star."

He stood there, holding her hands in his, as if she were a little girl and he were just a boy. They fell silent, each haunted with thoughts and dreams that would never come true. Then, as if frightened, the girl fled from the tent.

Tod heard her cry, "I'm going with you, Tod. I'm going!"

Whopper returned, leading the two saddled horses. He found Tod standing alone inside the tent, staring out into the dark night.

"They's ready, Tod," he said softly. "Them flat-hawned Mex kaks are hell to ride, ain't they, Tod?"

"Yes," said Tod. "Hell!" But he wasn't thinking of Mexican saddles.

TWENTY minutes later a cavalcade of one hundred horsemen rode out of the brush-choked canyon, heading south. Through the gloomy, starless night they rode with Villa in the lead on his famous mount, Turena.

At Villa's side rode Tod Richel. Two holstered sixguns swung from his lean hips. In the saddle boot was a Winchester 30-30. On one side of Tod rode big Whopper Jackson. Fear widened his white eyes. Fear that he tried to hide. In one hand he clutched the mummified head of a rattler.

At Tod's other side rode a girl. She was garbed in her mannish denims and scuffed vaquero boots. She was bareheaded, and her dark hair ruffled in the wind. Tod had tried to stop her coming. But she wouldn't listen.

Behind the four leading riders came the Dorados. Big-bodied men who sat their kaks as if they were part of their horses. Men with criss-cross bandoleers about their shoulders and peaked sombreros thonged to their chins. Men who would die for their beloved Villa. Men who were fighting a losing cause. The men from hell!

On and on they rode, the horses' hoofs beating a dull tattoo on the ground, dust rising into the dark heavens from beneath the hoofs. Through sheer-walled canyons of enormous boulders, out into the rolling sand country again where the black chaparral grew higher than the horses' heads.

An hour later they topped a ridge. Villa raised his right arm for a halt. Down in the gloomy valley below them yellow lights blinked in the darkness.

"Casa propia," murmured Estrallita sadly.

"Sure Mike!" Villa boomed. Then in Spanish: "And in thirty minutes it will be yours again, chiquita."

Slowly, warily, the riders moved down into the valley. No sound broke the intense silence of the hot night except the occasional click of a horse's hoof against a stone.

THE TINGLING icy finger of apprehension brought a chill to Tod Richel. The uncanny whisper of death came to his ears. He tensed, eyes probing the gloom that lay all about them. He shot a quick glance toward the girl. She was white-faced, staring at him as if trying to signal a warning of danger. Whopper's eyes were wide; his lips were moving.

Tod eased one of his six-guns from the holster. Villa had done the same. Two hundred yards ahead loomed the sprawling 'dobe hacienda, walled in as a castle of old. It stood in a grove of pepper trees, an ominous, forbidding structure with out-buildings and corrals in the rear.

Those fluttering trees could have told tales of days past when the flagstones in the courtyard rang with the laughter of a child; with the gay talk of happy caballeros, and dons and senoritas and senores in lace mantillas. There had been feasts then, barbecues and bailes, when the trumpeting jovial voice of big Tim O'Rourke rose above all the others as he talked with the guests, and paraded around the courtyard with his arm about the slender waist of his laughing wife.

Wine had flowed freely then, just as blood had run freely since then on the stones of the courtyard. Since those happy days knives had flashed in that courtyard. Bullets had pocked the plastered 'dobe walls. And the heavy boots of Carranzista soldiers had long since tromped into the dust the flowers and vines that had been planted by the delicate hands of a woman. Wine that had flowed then had turned to the flow of blood. And now there was blood on the moon.

Tod's grueling reflections were shattered by the sudden burst of gunfire. It seemed as if the earth ahead of him had suddenly become a blaze of deafening, blinding light. His brain seemed to explode.

Tod's horse went down. He sprawled on the ground. His ears roared. He tried to rise but couldn't. He couldn't see. The gun in his hand roared to the flip of his thumb as he fired blindly in the direction of the house.

"Estrallita!" he tried to yell. "Estrallita!"

But no sound passed his lips. He fought to regain his feet but his muscles wouldn't respond. Warm blood soaked the front of his flannel shirt. He cursed, firing both guns until they were empty. Around him in the darkness men fought hand to hand, screaming their curses. The wounded cried out in terror. Gun-thunder blasted aside all other sounds. Horses' hoofs churned the dust into a choking cloud.

As if coming from miles off, Tod heard the cries:

"Viva Villa!"

"Viva Caranza!"

Then all sounds faded in Tod's ears. The blanket of darkness pressed down on him, robbing him of his senses.

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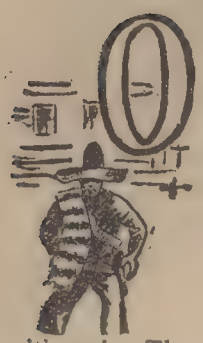

OUT OF THE engulfing darkness, Tod Richel was swirled back into consciousness. For a moment he lay motionless, blinking, his mind groping through the mental fog to recall what had happened.

His head throbbed with pain. There was a rag wrapped tightly about his forehead. His hands were bound tightly behind his back and he was lying on a stone floor. Without turning his head, Tod saw he was in a thick-walled, windowless room, pungent with the odors of old wood and mustiness. About the walls were heavy wooden wine casks, cobwebby now and blanketed with years of dust. On one of the casks a candle cast a flickering glow over the small room.

Biting back a groan, Tod turned his head. Through the silence struck a familiar whisper.

"Tod! Tod boy! I thought yuh was daid!"

Whopper's voice shot a thrill through Tod. He squirmed painfully about on the floor. In a far corner was Whopper, hands and feet bound to the solid beams of a barrel stand. Jackson's clothes were hanging in blood-stiffened shreds from his massive body. Across his black face and bare chest were half a dozen knife slashes. But he was grinning through battered lips. His eyes rolled joyfully.

"Tod!" he repeated. "I thought—"

"What happened, Whopper?"

Whopper shook his kinky-haired head dolefully. "I dunno, Tod. I jus' dunno. Lawdy, the ol' debbil was there to meet us last night with all his hellions—"

"Estrallita—Villa—?"

"I don't know about them, Tod," Whopper mourned. "Killed, I guess. I nebber seen so much blood in all my days. I been prayin' to my snake's haid but he won't talk to me. It's mawnin now. You been asleep...."

Tod thought first of Estrallita. Stabbing pain, like dagger thrusts, tore at his heart. Whopper's tense whisper went on.

TOD LEARNED much of what had happened last night. Obviously they had walked into a trap. Instead of just a small group of Carranzista officers at the hacienda, the place swarmed with soldiers—waiting for them. In that first lethal blast, Tod had gone down from a bullet crease across his forehead. Whopper didn't know exactly what happened. He said at least half of Villa's hundred men fell in that first burst of gunfire. Some had stayed with the big black man and fought, only to be killed or taken prisoner. Some had fled for their lives. Just outside the grilled gate of the hacienda the sand had turned crimson. There were mangled bodies of men and horses to greet the morning sun.

"They was five o' us in heah, Tod," continued Whopper.

"Where's the other three?"

"Them Carranza boys done come an' got 'em just a few minutes ago. I heard the shootin'. They's daid now."

Five prisoners had been taken, Whopper and Tod among them. Three of them had already been stood against the crumbling 'dobe wall and executed. Tod knew he and Whopper would be next. Whopper knew it too. But there was no sign of fear in his eyes. Only sorrow, regret.

"I guess ol' Whopper is at the end of his trail, Tod."

Tod nodded. It didn't matter so much to him, now that the end had come. Thoughts of Estrallita—and Villa—whirled through his mind. He only hoped that they had by some

miracle escaped. He thought of Helen Moore. Somehow she seemed a dim figure in a hazy past. It seemed years since he had known her, since that trail drive into Mexico.

Flaunting thoughts of his failure to get the murderer of Ase and Rawhide Moore came to Tod Richel. In the little room all was silent except for Whopper's rasping breathing. The weird light played grotesquely over the walls of the wine room in the hacienda that had once been Estrallita O'Rourke's home....

"What yuh thinkin' about, Tod?" Whopper husked.

"Just thinkin' about Estrallita, Whopper."

"Finest gal I ever seen, Tod. If they laid a hand on her I'd like to live long nuff to stick 'em a few times wif my knife."

They fell silent. Cold sweat beaded Tod's forehead. His body grew numb. Round his waist, beneath his shirt, he could still feel his money belt press against his body. The grim irony of still having that money seemed to mock him.

"Listen," whispered Whopper.

TOD RICHEL tensed. He heard it then. The tramp of feet coming down a stone-floored corridor toward them. Suddenly the heavy door of the room moved inward on creaking hinges. Inside stepped a fat-bellied, pockmarked Mexican army officer. At his back in the doorway stood three tattered, swart-faced soldados. The officer's red eyes peered down at Tod, then at Whopper.

"Vente, nigger," he grinned leeringly.

He stepped forward, cut the rawhide thongs that had held Whopper to the heavy wooden posts. Whopper, hands still bound at his back, rose stiffly to his feet as the Mexican cut the thongs about his boots. Whopper towered over the dapper, grinning little Mexican officer like a giant. His crimson-stained eyes sought Tod's.

"I'm not afraid, Tod," he said steadily.

There was mist in Tod's feverish eyes. In Whopper's squared shoulders he saw defiance, contempt for these gloating Mexicans who were taking him out to shoot him. Whopper wasn't afraid. He'd stand stiff and straight in front of that firing squad, a curse on his lips for those who were about to kill him, and a prayer in his heart for those he loved. And he'd spit in their faces when they offered him a blindfold.

"Good huntin', Whopper," Tod said.

Whopper strode to the door, the Mexican officer at his heels. Whopper turned once more. "So long, Tod, boy," he tried to grin.

"So long, Whopper."

THEN THEY were gone, the door closing after them, and the tramp of their boots fading. The sound of Whopper's last words seemed to linger in the ghastly chamber where Tod lay waiting his turn to die. Ticking seconds passed. Then outside in the courtyard men's sudden frantic cries filtered to Tod's ears. Out there Mexican soldados cursed. Riflefire crackled like ignited firecrackers. Horses' hoofs drummed into the packed 'dobe dirt. Then as abruptly as the commotion had begun, it stopped.

Tod lay rigid. What was the meaning of those shouts and that sudden burst of gunfire? What had happened to Whopper? He was torn from his thoughts by the sound of booted feet outside the door. Every nerve jangling, Tod caught the sound of voices on the other side of the plank door. One of those voices sounded strangely familiar —the low voice of an American! No doubt about that. Tod knew that voice! Stunned, he listened.

The door pushed inward. Tod stared at the man who now stood inside the

room. He stood there, that man, smiling malignantly, while his black eyes shone with drunken triumph.

It was Durango Duke!

THE SLEEK, oily gambler from Tres Ritos had changed but little the past year. He still wore a dark suit and fancy boots. The white, womanish fingers of his right hand fondled the butt of a sixgun he had holstered beneath his coat.

"Don't stare at me like that, Tod," he purred, still smiling. "You act like you were staring at a ghost."

"Durango Duke," breathed Richel. That was all he could say. "Durango Duke."

Suave, confident—that was Durango Duke. At the door stood three Mexican soldiers at respectful attention, eager to obey Duke's slightest wish.

"Your pal just got away, Tod," said Duke. "Stupid of us but we forgot about the knife he carried." He shrugged. "But he won't get far. Some of the men have ridden out after him."

Tod Richel wanted to cry out for joy. Whopper had outwitted them. Escaped! There was a slim chance they might never find him again. A hundred damning thoughts rushed through his mind, perplexing him. Raging questions came to him, without answers. But outwardly he was cold as ice. "What are you doin' here, Duke?"

Durango Duke laughed harshly. "I'm here because I was smart enough to choose the right side in this revolution, Tod. Too bad that you got on the losing end."

"Yo're with the Carranza troops?"

"Have been all along," Duke gloated.

"What happened to General Villa—an' the girl?"

Duke sobered. "We blundered again," he admitted tightly. "Villa got away last night. I know nothing about a girl."

Tod was stalling, leading Duke on to get the story. He knew Duke was going to kill him. But there was still a lot of things he wanted cleared up before Duke's mocking voice snapped orders to the firing squad.

"Duke," said Tod softly, slowly, "you know how my brother was killed! You know about Rawhide Moore—"

It was a shot in the dark, but it hit home. Durango Duke started, eyes slit-hideous in the close confines of that thick-walled room. It beat into Tod's ears like a maddening maniac's cackle. It made Tod's eyes smolder with the fires of a man whose soul is tortured.

TOD RICHEL hardly heard Duke cease his laughing long enough to snap orders for the soldiers to return to the courtyard. He'd bring the prisoner out for the execution, Duke told the men in Spanish. Then Duke was talking again.

"I've got to tell you this, Tod," he mocked. "You'll be dead in another hour so it doesn't matter. It's too good to keep. I want you to know the way Durango Duke does things."

"Go on."

"You're an awful fool, Tod," he smirked.

"Go on," Tod repeated in a strange voice.

Duke laughed again. Then he stopped, and a crazy, wolfish snarl played over his thin lips. Richel saw Duke was drunk. He was playing with Tod as a cat does a mouse before the kill.

"You thought Villa was responsible for the raid on your ranch. You blind fool! That was my idea. Clever, what? I got that dumb ox of a Bart Stoy to dress up like Villa. Of nights he rode with my men. Those raiders were my own men!"

DUKE HURRIED on. "Sure we killed your brother. We meant to

kill you and that Jackson, too. We wanted your ranch and didn't want to pay for it. It was mine and Stoy's frame-up. I was to get the money for the wet cattle and he was to get the ranches we raided. We needed your place bad, Tod, it being near the river. That made it mighty handy in handling the wet beef. I made plenty of money but things got hot for us after you left and Stoy quit."

"Rawhide?" whispered Tod hoarsely. "What about—?"

"Funny thing about that, Mister Villaman. Stoy and I told the old coot the straight about that. Carranza did want beef. We just let you and old Moore make the drive for us. Then when you got almost there, my men played hell with you again. Carranza got the herd all right. But I sold it to him. Then joined him. How do you like this new ranch of mine, Tod? Good enough, huh? It'll be mine soon as the soldiers leave. The Mex government is givin' it to me for trying to corner Villa for them."

When Duke's boastful words stopped, Tod made no move. He just lay on the floor looking up at Duke like a man gazes at a snake.

"I see, Duke," he said finally. "I see."

"Now you and Rawhide and Jackson will have something to talk about in hell. I told Jackson too. Let's go, cowboy. Those greasers are getting itchy for the show."

Drawing his gun, Duke stooped and cut the thongs about Tod's wrists and boots. He stepped back, gun leveled at the prisoner. Slowly, painfully slow, Tod pulled himself to his feet. He didn't seem to give a damn now that the end had come.

"Let's go, Duke," he croaked.

Duke took a step forward, the gun poking ahead of him in his clenched fist. Tod put one foot forward, ducked, whirled! Fast—like a striking snake! His right fist shot out like a piston as he sprang at Duke. The explosion of the gun drowned the shrill curse that came from the gambler.

LIKE A SNARLING, crazed beast Tod Richel fought. Under the smashing barrage, Duke went down, eyes wild with terror, the gun falling from his grasp. Picking up the screaming man, Tod hurled him through the air. The body smashed into one of the huge casks, fell soddenly to the floor a crumpled, lifeless heap. Durango Duke, the killer, was dead. His neck was broken.

Scooping up the sixgun, Tod ran out the door into the corridor. It all seemed like a nightmare of yelling Mexicans, blastling rifles. Then he was out in the courtyard. A Mexican soldado leaped into his path. The man's rifle roared. Hot lead burned Tod's side as his own gun flamed. The man sank to the ground. Somewhere behind Tod an officer screeched a command.

Tod laughed. Two more guards at the front gate. Close by stood a saddled horse. Across the open courtyard he raced through a veritable gantlet of whining lead. He seemed to bear a charmed life. Twice more his gun spewed. Through a red haze he saw the guards go down.

Strange what a man thinks of when death is at hand. "Mexicans can't shoot!" thought Tod. "Can't shoot—for hell—!"

He hit the back of the rearing horse in a flying heap. The whip of the wind against his hot face blinded him. Frantically his bronc's hoofs beat into the sand. Out across the brush he rode like a demon in a hail of lead. While at his back Mexican soldiers swarmed over the courtyard of the hacienda, yelling, shooting like men gone mad.

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DEEP IN the Diablo Desert of Mexico, a man sat astride a stumbling-legged bronc that slogged wearily through the dripping sand. The man's head sagged forward on his chest. He looked more dead than alive.

The sweltering afternoon sun beat down on him and on the blinding expanse of white sand where bleached bones lay upon the earth and things crawled from scant growth of the yucca and Spanish dagger, leaving tiny furrows behind them. Overhead in the cloudless sky two buzzards slowly circled, as they had since noon. If God had given those black buzzards brains they would have thought it strange that the rider down there didn't die. He kept clinging to the back of that faltering horse, riding on and on to the north.

Toward evening that rider pulled up at the filthy little 'dobe hut of a weazened goat herder. After the horse was watered and the rider had drunk from a rotten gourd, he mounted again. The Mexican stared in awe, as if in the presence of death.

"How far to the Rio, old one?" asked Tod.

"Cinco kilos," whispered the Mexican.

"What news comes to your ears of Villa, compadre?"

"Villa," whispered the aged Mexican regretfully, crossing himself. "Ah, Dios, it is el fin. Villa is done. Wait, Senor...."

He scampered into the hut and came out with some burnt tortillas in his claw-like hand. Tod accepted them with thanks and rode on.

"Vaya con Dios, foolish one," the goat herder murmured, staring after him. "Strange men are the gringos...."

A MAN WHO had come up from hell rode into Tres Ritos late that night. It was Tod Richel. When he stopped in front of the livery stable his horse groaned and fell to the dust. The warped-legged liveryman blinked his sleep-drugged eyes in amazement as Tod bought another horse from him and paid for the animal from a money belt that was filled with bills.

Then with the man's permission, Tod staggered to the rear of the barn and flopped down on some hay in an empty stall. It was early the next night when he awoke. At a little chink eating house near the barn he ate like a starved man. When he had finished he returned to the barn. He had seen no one he knew. Tres Ritos, though, hadn't changed much during the past year. Cowtowns down along the Rio never seem to change much.

"Where can I find Sheriff Bart Stoy, Mister?" asked Tod of the liveryman.

The oldster looked surprised. He told Tod that Stoy wasn't sheriff now. Another fellow was sheriff and he had stopped all the hell they'd been having on the range.

"I reckon you'll find Stoy out to his Circle-M, feller."

Circle-M! Rawhide Moore's old spread!

On his way out of town, Tod stopped at a little store and bought a new gun and cartridge belt. He left the twinkling lights of Tres Ritos behind him. Across the familiar mesquite-dotted valley he put his horse to an easy lope. No hurry about the way Tod rode. Only a hint of grim purpose, like a gent who knows exactly what he is doing.

Overhead the moon shone down on the man and horse. In the moon-fog, Tod's eyes burned with a dull red

light. He shoved shells past the loading gate of his gun with fingers that were fleshless and brown.

WHEN HE rode up into the yard of the Circle-M, Tod kept his eyes on the lighted front window of the house. He halted in the deep shadows of the cottonwoods, moved forward on foot. He didn't go to the front door. Some inner power pulled him toward the front window. Voices from inside the house filtered out into the night. Then just outside the window, Tod stopped, stunned!

There in the front room of the old Circle-M ranch house a big man sat slumped in a chair. The flesh hung loosely on his face and there was a vital look of misery in his eyes. It was Bart Stoy who had been handsome once. Now he looked aged and broken.

In a chair across from Bart Stoy sat the girl who had once been Helen Moore. There were tears in her eyes, a tired, worn look about her face. She was holding a baby in her arms as she rocked back and forth.

Suddenly Stoy lifted his hands. Outside the window, Tod started. He hadn't noticed until then that both of Stoy's hands were oddly bandaged.

"Stubs!" Stoy cried out bitterly. "Stubs! My fingers gone! Ruined for life!" His head dropped to his chest. His shoulders, once so straight, slumped dejectedly.

Helen's lips trembled and her eyes closed to shut back the tears. "It's the price we have to pay, Bart," she whispered. "We should have told Dad and Tod that we were planning to be married before they left...."

Stoy's head jerked erect. "Always thinkin' of Tod, ain't yuh!" he accused. "You can't forget him!"

"I'm just thinking of the wrong we did him, Bart," she murmured remorsefully. "We—we sent him to his death. He's dead! Dad's gone. Then

last night this—this happened to you—"

"It was that Jackson!" Stoy cried. His voice wasn't the deep-chested rumble as of old. It was the cracked voice of a man who has suffered. "He came up on me last night at the barn. I didn't have a chance. I can still see his gleamin' face shinin' there in the dark. I'll never forget it! He knocked me out. When you found me he had—he had done this!"

"We got to start anew, Bart. Got to do it for little Bill's sake. You've been good to me. I love you. Now we got to go ahead and may God forgive us...."

In the front room of the ranch house her low throbbing words seemed to echo in the air. The golden lamplight fell upon the faces of the two people and the sleeping baby. And no sound broke the silence except the squeaking rocker upon the carpeted floor.

Then Stoy's lips moved and his eyes

closed. "God forgive us..." he whispered. And that was all he said.

Outside in the night, Tod moved toward his ground-tied horse. The gun dangled from his limp fingers down at his side. He mounted and rode straight south toward the Rio Grande.

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TOD RICHEL lost track of time during the days that followed. A man does that down in the desolate sandy wastes in Mananaland. And after a time he gets so he doesn't care.

From saloon to saloon along the back trails in Mexico, Tod rode like a man who continually seeks something he knows he will never find. He tried to forget things that were stamped upon his mind as indelibly as the brand marks a cow.

From one Mexican settlement to another he rode, sleeping in the brush of nights under the lonely stars. For days he spoke to no one, and the sound of his voice became strange to his ears. His blue eyes became the color of an icy stream and his skin the bronzed hue of the cottonwood trees in winter.

Mexicans in the cantinas would watch Tod as he rode slowly past. Barefoot, black-shawled mothers would come to the doorways of the mud huts, scream invectives at the nibbling goats close by, then gaze in awe at the lonely rider whose eyes seemed to be looking into the Great Beyond.

"It is the sun," the Mexicans would whisper. "It drives the gringos loco. They cannot stand it."

One day Tod rode into Parral. Only a few Mexicans loitered along the street. Most of them were inside, out of the boiling hot sun. At the greasy doors of a cantina Tod dismounted and went inside where it was gloomy and cool.

There were no customers in there. Only the barkeep who was an American. A baldheaded little gent with pale gray eyes and a ready smile.

"Always glad to see an American," said the barman conversationally. "I come down here in '12 on a minin' deal. But she didn't pan out. Just didn't pan out, that's all."

Tod fingered his drink. It seemed good being inside where it was cool. He didn't mind listening to the barkeep. He was a nice little man.

"Fine lookin' mirror yuh got back there," said Tod.

THE LITTLE barkeep turned and looked at the huge mirror that was on the white-washed wall behind the bar. He had looked at it countless times during the past few months. But he never became tired of gazing at it.

"Finest mirror this side of Mexico City or Santone," he said pridefully. He looked into the mirror at his own reflection and at Tod's, and his sloping shoulders straightened. "Took a month fer it to get here an' a week to put her up. But she's worth it. Finest mirror I ever seen."

It was a hobby with him, that mirror. He kept talking about it and how it took so long to ship it to him and a week to put it up in his little saloon here in Parral. But it was worth it, he repeated.

"Yes, sir," he began. "I—"

"Listen," said Tod.

They both stood still listening. Tod stepped to the door as the prancing sound of a horse's hoofs beat into the hard ground in the street outside. Then Tod's body stiffened as if struck with an electric current. Down the street toward him rode Pancho Villa! Villa, the same as always! Stiff-backed and straight in the kak, gleaming dark eyes

looking straight ahead, a grim smile on his lips. The same confident carriage; the same indomitable personality.

Tears filled Tod's eyes. He not only saw Pancho Villa. He saw the spectral horsemen at the mighty man's back—the men from hell! Villa's Dorados! But they weren't there, of course. Villa was alone, a pitiful figure in a way, because he was alone.

The doorways of the 'dobe buildings that flanked the street were suddenly filled with people. Men and women and children who, like Tod, stood stiffly erect, their hands at their sides and tears in their eyes. He was their Villa. They made no sound as they stood there in the doorways. But there were unspoken words upon their lips. Those people wanted to run out into the street and scream.

"Villa!" they wanted to cry. "Viva Villa Villa! Villa!"

But they made no sound because they were afraid.

THEN VILLA saw Tod standing in the doorway of the saloon. He leaped from his horse and cried:

"Tod! Sure Mike! Tod!"

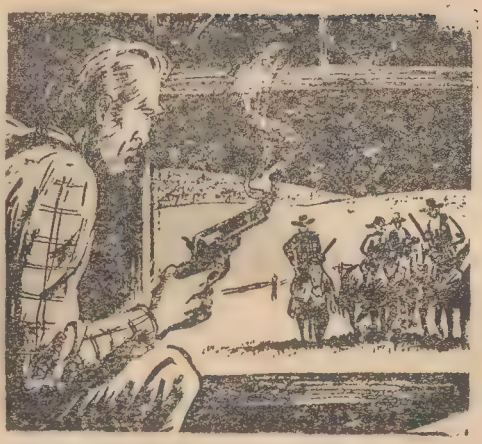
Their arms were around one another. Villa made no effort to hide the unshed tears in his eyes. They stepped inside the gloomy bar. The slope-shouldered little barman poured drinks with a hand that couldn't hold the bottle steady. Tod and Villa lifted the two glasses. They clinked as their rims touched.

"Drink, Tod," boomed Villa in Spanish. "It may be the last."

"May there be many more," said Tod.

They drank, then smashed their glasses against the wall.

"It'll be the last, Tod," said Villa slowly, a queer smile on his lips. "They'll get me. I have a little ranch just outside of town. The government has granted me amnesty. But it means little, Tod. They'll get me."



Villa stared moodily past the bug-eyed barkeep at the mirror as he said it. Suddenly his eyes gleamed. His lips parted in a grin. His right hand made a flashing movement down, then up.

Gun-thunder seemed to shake the 'dobe walls. Shattering glass, the startled cry of the frightened barkeep, ripped wide the quiet of the siesta. On the wall behind the bar the mirror was there no longer. It lay in pieces upon the floor.

"Always wanted to bust one of them things," Villa laughed loudly. "But I never had the chance till now. They sound like—like hell when they break, don't they?"

Tod had to grin. The saloonman's head came up over the top of the bar. His eyes were bulging out of his sallow face. Finally words came to his lips. He said in a trembling voice: "Took a month to git that there mirror down here. Took a week to put her up an' she busted just like that." He wagged his head dolefully. It was something he'd never forget—the breaking of that mirror. "Busted just like that," he repeated.

STILL CHUCKLING, Villa counted out a sheaf of paper money on the bartop.

"Buy a new one, hombrecito," he grinned. "Buy two of them. They're

pretty. They make a lot of noise when they break. And by having two of them, I'll have another one to break if I ever come back."

Villa and Tod went outside where their horses stood in the afternoon sun.

"Why are you not out at the Hacienda Shamrock, Tod?" asked Villa curiously.

Tod shook his head as haunting memories again stirred him. "I have no wish to go there, mi General," he said softly.

"She'll never be the same without you, Tod?"

Tod Richel started as if by a blow. Hope, anguish, fear flooded into his eyes. "God—General—?" he cried, chiokingly. "She—"

"Estrallita is out there."

"Estrallita is dead, General!"

Villa shook his head sadly. "Estrallita and I escaped that night with eight men. She—"

Tod's mind whirled, unable to grasp the meaning of the rest of Villa's words. Giving a little cry, he ran for his bronc. Hoofs beat into the street of the sleepy little town of Paral as Tod rode furiously toward an old Mexican hacienda that was called Shamrock.

"Estrallita!" he kept calling. "Estrallita!" But his words were lost in the drum of the hoof-beats.

While standing alone in front of the cantina, Villa stared after him. Villa's eyes were soft. Eyes that had once flooded with tears.

"God bless you, Tod," he whispered. Then he smiled. "Sure Mike!"

That night as the red desert sun dropped over the barren peaks of the Huerachic Mountains, Tod Richel rode into Hacienda Shamrock. Estrallita had seen him coming and she was at the front gate to meet him. She wasn't wearing the mannish garb as in the days past. She was wearing a trim long-skirted dress. Estrallita O'Rourke was a woman—a beautiful woman whose black hair and dark eyes made the pallor of her skin look soft and lovely, like the petal of a rose.

As Tod took her into his arms there was nothing they could say. Words were futile things now. They just stood there in the colorful evening glow, their souls crying out for joy.

"Tod!" sobbed Estrallita. "I knew it! Of night I have prayed before the altar while the candles died out. Tod! Tod!"

"Estrallita!" he whispered.

They stood there without moving until they were aware of another presence. They turned, and there stood Whopper Jackson, his pearly white teeth showing in a delighted grin.

"Snake's haid whispe'd yuh-all was comin' heah, Tod," he said "I told Miss Estrallita dey couldn't kill a Texican like you. No suh!"

Tod laughed and gripped the black man's hand.

IT WAS ONE night a week later that the three of them sat in chairs in the courtyard where only a few weeks before wine and blood had stained the dust. But time and the desert wind had obliterated those grisly stains of the past. Now the moon shone softly down on the three of them— Whopper Jackson, the knife-thrower, who sat cross-legged on the flagstones, his white eyes beaming with pride as he caressed his snake's head and watched Tod and Estrallita who sat side by side, holding hands.

Somewhere at the rear of the hacienda the tinkling of a guitar drifted into the night. Somebody was singing a Spanish song of love. They were the loyal mozos who had served big Tim O'Rourke and who had returned.

Estrallita's last name wasn't O'Rourke now. Only two days ago one of the padres from Rosario had ridden in on a mule's back and joined her with Tod Richel in holy wedlock. That night there had been a baile and Estrallita had danced as she had never

danced before. Mexicans for miles around had ridden to the hacienda to feast on the barbecued beef and drink wine and talk of the happy days that lay ahead for the beautiful Estrallita and her brave gringo husband whose blue eyes were no longer sad.

"Life has been good to me, Estrallita," said Tod thoughtfully.

Estrallita's soft eyes were filled with adoration for the only man she had ever loved. "Yes, Tod," she whispered. "And prayers do come true."

THEY HAD forgotten Whopper's presence. They forgot he was sitting close by watching them until he cleared his throat. Then they looked at him and smiled.

"They sho' do, Miss Star," he said solemnly. "If they didn't I mighta lost my haid one time 'stead just the lobe o' my ear. Don't guess I eveh tol' yuh an' Tod how I lost the tip o' my ear, did I?"

"Guess not," said Tod.

"See, it happened back in Montana one winter, Tod. I was cookin' fo' the old Split-Ear spread. Well, suh, one of the boys got sick an' I had to ride through a blizzard to town to fetch the saw-bones. I fetched him all right but when I got back to the ranch my face an' hands, they was froze stiff. Took me a week to git thawed out.

"When I got up agin one of the boys says, "Whopper, the tip o' that theah ear o' yourn is gone.' I says, 'Yuh is loco, boy. That ear o' mine is all right."

"But when I felt o' her the lobe was gone sho' nuff. That's the way I lost her, Tod. That's just the way she happened. She musta just froze an' dropped off that night 'cause she was gone. Gone just like that but I didn't feel her go. An' she's been gone even since. Eveh since. An' that goes to show yuh that they's funny things can happen in this life. . . ."

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REAL WESTERN STORIES

THE TRADING POST

Department Of Fictional Folklore

ONLY ONE MAN OF THE WEST

A Bear Boscoe Story

by Harold Gluck

I'M A-SETTIN out there in a nice big chair, just trying to get a bit of rest. When a man reaches my age, the bones won't move the way they should. Jed Jusper, who owns the Double Cross Ranch, says I can spend the summer there, as his guest, mind you. So while I'm in that chair, the foreman comes to me.

"A city fellow. From one of those big magazines. Wants you should tell him about the men of the West."

How ignorant can them city folks be? Maybe it really ain't their fault; what they read in history books, they believe. No such a thing as men of the West. Only *one* man of the West. And everybody out here knows it was Bear Boscoe who made the West.

Why if it weren't for Bear Boscoe, you wouldn't have an East. That's right! You folks heard me. Chief Badum almost wrecked the East. General Katchum defeated Chief Badum in the Battle of Broken Knee; seems Chief Badum slipped from his pony and broke his left knee, so the battle was over. That crafty redskin agreed to go on a reservation, but with reservations. For twenty three years he worked on a plan to do away with the East. Then on that night of June 14th. he sneaked away with twenty four of his braves. They had been busy all that time counting the buffalo on the plains. Came to a figure of 45,678,932 critters.

When you go and think about it, it *was* such a simple idea. They was goin' start a stampede of all those buffalo, every one of them, big and small. Head 'em towards the East. When buffalo get a-goin', nothing can stop 'em. They

would just trample down the East.

On the morning of June 15th. those animals were a-headed for the East. People thought it was a cloud in the sky, but it was those critters. And then at Fort Sill, General Katchum sends for my pal, Bear Boscoe. "The army can do nothing," he sighs. "It's up to you to save the East."

Some people just think Bear Boscoe was the strongest man in the West. True, but only half of it; he also had more brains than any other man. He and me goes out and sees them critters. Not a thing could stop them, except Bear Boscoe. He starts to blow and blow. That raises the sand and dirt, which sets into the eyes of the buffalo.

Now every man who ever hunted buffalo knows that when sand and dirt gets into the eyes of them critters, they get dizzy, and go round and round in circles. That's what happened. For eight days and nights Bear Boscoe blows; finally them buffalo are dizzy as can be. They just all fall down, plumb tired, all back from where they started. Imagine what could be if they ever go to the East. No East!

Chief Badum and his braves also got sand and dirt in their eyes; which made them dizzy. But Bear Boscoe brought them all back to the reservation. It taught them a lesson. Chief Badum became the famous Chief Goodum; my pal, Bear Boscoe, taught him a lesson.

He was always trying to teach people how to do the right thing. You know the N.U.T. R.R.? It runs from Pottersville to Platetown. Only narrow gauge R.R. in the West. If it wasn't for my pal, Bear Boscoe, they would have gone broke, and all them small places along the line would have become ghost towns.

A FELLOW who'd gone to school and had a lot of learnin' in engineering went and built the tracks, made them for standard gauge. Then comes the day when everything is finished. Some job! They had to go dig through a mountain, go over the Deepy River. Five miles of quicksand also had to be made solid.

"Put the first train on the tracks," shouts the President of the N.U.T.R.R.

"Can't do it," says a man who built them trains. "You gave us an order for narrow gauge trains.

"And you gave me an order to build standard gauge track," says this here fellow who built it.

It was terrible. The cattle men would never get the beef to market in time. Every eye was on my pal Bear Buscoe.

"You must help us," pleaded the president of the N.U.T.R.R. "The future of the West depends upon you."

There was a handcar that fitted the standard gauge track. My pal turns to me. "You pump up; you pump down. I'll sit on the edge of the car."

Know what he did, folks? Well, I pumped up. I pumped down. That handcar went all along the tracks. He just took his two hands and pushed the tracks closer. Now and then he tells me to stop, and takes a good look to be sure he's got things even.

"Pump more up and down," says he.

When it was all finished how them folks cheered.

You always have some jealous dogs around; later they went and said he could have done it easier: Stretch them narrow gauge railroad cars and make 'em into standard gauge cars. Yep, he could have done it, but he figured this was better. And them cattle men got all the beef to the market in time. Why if it wasn't for Bear Boscoe, all those ranches would have failed.

That's why I'm restin' my weary bones on the Double Cross Ranch. Because the grandpappy of Jed Jusper would have lost this ranch with the rest of them. A bit of gratitude for the one pal of Bear Boscoe. Men of the West? Huh! Only *one* man of the West. Bear Boscoe. So if you have kids what go to school, please teach 'em right about the West.

★

MIGHTY ROUGH SPELL

by Lee Floren

WHEN FINALLY James Clyman saw the American flag over Fort Atkinson, the trapper was so overcome with thankfulness that he fell unconscious on the Nebraska prairie. Spotting him with binoculars, bearded men rushed out to carry him into the famous fort located at the junction of the Platte and Missouri Rivers.

"That's Jim Clyman," a trapper said. "He was one of the first men to sign up with Ashley last year."

A factor looked down at the prostrate man. Clyman was gaunt, cheeks sunken under his whiskers. His moccasins were in tatters. "He looks like he has had a mighty rough spell of it," the factor said.

And Clyman, indeed, had had a "mighty rough spell." He'd been in the wilderness alone for over a month, and most of this time with no rifle or other weapon. For days upon end he'd had only the rolling buffalo-grassed prairie around him.

Clyman had been a member of a party out locating "beaver sign" in the foothills of the Rockies. Indians had cut him away from his fellow trappers. They had stalked him, itching for "his hair." But he had out-manuevered and out-witted them. When he had returned to the camp, the party had moved on—thinking the Cheyennes had "got him."

Panic in his wiry body, he had taken stock. He had his rifle and eleven bullets. For over two weeks, he stayed close to the camping area, hoping somebody would return to look for him.

But nobody came.

Accordingly he headed in the general direction of Fort Atkinson, at least four hundred miles away across this rolling sea of buffalo-grass. He came at length to a river. Was it the Platte—or the Arkansas? He hoped and prayed it was the Platte.

A man alone, a speck against the universe, he stumbled onward. Soon his rifle was empty. His belly hung to his backbone in hunger. Hostile Indians moved back and forth, gay on their painted ponies. He hid in the boulders and timber until they had gone out of sight.

With his next-to-the-last bullet, he killed a buffalo. Greedily he tore into the warm beast's bowels, eating the liver and heart. With strips of buffalo hide, he made a halter. His plan was to *crease* a wild mustang so he could get a mount. He stalked a water-hole for days and then, the mustangs came—they roared in, wild and strong, hoofs flashing.

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Wade Claybrook had rested Flat Creek's case against this accused murderer without bringing forth any evidence of his guilt. What was up, Judge Steele wondered? Was Claybrook off his feed? Then Steele remembered that Wade was a tricky poker player.

TORCH OF DEATH

Judge Steele story

by Lon Williams

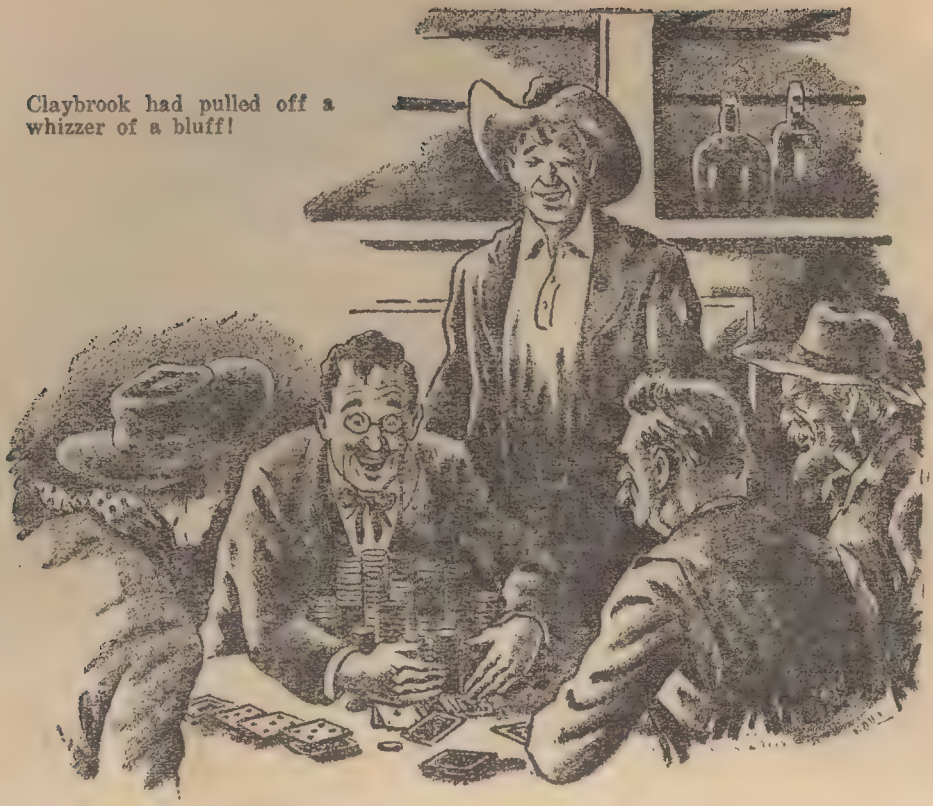
JUDGE WARDLOW STEELE sat down with a weary sigh. Here they were again—Sheriff Jerd Buckalew, poker-faced and solemn; Clerk James Skiffington, skinny and spectral; Prosecutor Wade Claybrook, dignified and unsmiling; gawking, eager spectators; and a brazen-eyed, long-fingered baboon to be tried and hung.

This was Flat Creek's court of criminal justice. Rightly defined, it was a mill. An ordinary task, one could finish; even a pretentious structure could someday be completed. But justtice was never finished, its mill never stilled. A judge could never mount his judicial rostrum, look down upon those about him and say to himself, *Well, this winds it up; when this varmint is hung, our work is done.* No, by thunder, there was no end.

Court had been convened. Steele jerked his head at his clerk. "Call it, Skiffy."

Skiffington rose, tall and uncouth, and screeched eerily, "People *versus* Zinker, alias Zink-or-swim, Yarmouth. Charge, first-degree murder."

Mention of murder brought anger out of its restless sleep. Steele glared down at this latest hangrope candidate and growled fiercely, "Murder, eh?" When there was no response, except a contemptuous smile on Yarmouth's massive, middle-aged face, he growled with increased ferocity, "You look like



Claybrook had pulled off a whizzer of a bluff!

some conceited baboon who thinks hisself too smart to get caught. Well, be-consarned, yours is no uncommon ailment. Whar's your lawyer?"

A chunky, solemn-faced character in long-tailed coat and baggy trousers got up. He was dark-haired, vigorous, blue-eyed, and about thirty. "I am his lawyer, sir. Paddock Trundy, may it please your honor."

Steele eyed him with distrust and his natural aversion for lawyers. "New hyar, eh?"

"Comparatively so, if your honor please."

Steele sniffed. "Be-consarned if thar ain't more lawyers in Flat Creek than gold-diggers. Whar you from?"

Trundy drew himself erect. "If your honor please, I am from that great and thriving state of Ohio."

"Fine state, eh?"

"A wonderful state, sir."

"Then why in tarnation didn't you stay with it? If thar's one thing we don't need more of in Flat Creek, it's lawyers."

Trundy lifted his eyebrows and replied haughtily, "If I may say so, your honor, a community's need for lawyers is no measure of a lawyer's need for clients—unless possibly in an inverse ratio. As to why I came here my answer is, that I came in free and honorable exercise of my privilege as a citizen, for which I need account to nobody."

Steele held his temper. Here was a bulldog with fighting spirit, a quality he respected even in his enemies. He tugged at his mustache and slowly swung left. "Whar's our man?"

A stocky redhead with noble and intellectual demeanor got up, his unsmiling dignity merging into disapproval. "Wade Claybrook, sir. Prosecuting attorney. With your honor's permission, I suggest that defendant be required to plead, and that we get on with his trial."

Steele's face tightened. "By thunder, Claybrook, your wish for speed hits me exactly right. See if you can practice what you preach." He glared down at defendant Yarmouth. "All right, you murderin' ape, what's your plea?"

TRUNDY arose promptly. "If your honor please this gentleman's plea is not guilty. And may I say here and now that he could not have been guilty, because when this alleged murder was being committed defendant was at Cloud's Fork, ten miles away."

"Saying that and proving it you'll find to be something else," Steele commented. "A murderer's road ain't easy around hyar."

Jurors were empaneled, witnesses summoned, sworn and herded to their back room. At a nod from Steele, Claybrook glanced at a deputy.

"Call Boaz Welfare."

A pink-faced roly-poly was brought in.

Here, thought Steele, was where Claybrook could have practiced his own preaching. "Wade, why in tarnation did you have to call this time-wasting blabbermouth?"

Claybrook's temper flared. "Sir, it seems to me this situation has been explained often enough; but, if I must, I certainly can explain it again."

"Then do so."

"Very well, sir. Before an accused may be convicted of murder, it must first be shown that there has been a murder."

"Be-consarned, if a grand jury indictment don't mean a murder's been committed, what in tarnation does it mean?"

Claybrook sighed. "If your honor please, even though it were known by you, by these officers, these jurors, and every individual present that a murder has been done, that fact would be wholly immaterial. An accused has a constitutional right to be confronted by those who testify against him. Hence, before this present jury, we begin as if nothing was known."

"Then begin, by thunder."

Claybrook faced Welfare, his lips showing deep-seated personal distaste. "Your name, sir?"

Welfare looked along his nose at Claybrook. "My name, sir, is Boaz Welfare, and I object to being called a time-wasting blabbermouth."

"I did not call you a time-wasting blabbermouth," Claybrook retorted.

"I didn't say you did, but I was called that and I don't like it. I do my duty as coroner of this town and community, and I do it exceedingly well, sir."

"Now see hyar, Welfare," said Steele, "*prove* you're not a time-wasting blabbermouth, and I'll apologize."

Without sympathy, Claybrook asked, "As this town's ready and efficient coroner, was any requisition made of your services last Saturday night between nine and ten o'clock?"

Welfare replied sulkily, "If you'll keep quiet, I'll tell you about it. Faithful to duty, day or night, I was about to enter my office when a deputy sheriff touched my shoulder and said to me, 'Mr. Welfare, how would you like to cast your discerning eye upon a newly discovered victim of criminal aggression?' Which was all he needed to say in order to invoke prompt and unfailing action on my part."

Paddock Trundy got up with a sarcastic smirk on his chunky face. "If your honor please, I'd like to ask Coroner Welfare what college that deputy sheriff attended?"

WELFARE scowled at Trundy. "You are being frivolous, sir."

"You heeard that question," snapped Steele. "Be-consarned, I'd like to know its answer myself."

Claybrook joined in, "So would I."

Welfare's lips pouted. "He's not attended any college that I know of."

"Then what did he actually say?" Claybrook demanded.

"I told you what he said."

Steele intervened angrily, "Welfare, one more impertinence out of you and I'll fine you for contempt of court."

Claybrook persisted, "What did that deputy say to you?"

"All right," Welfare shouted belligerently, "I'll tell you what he said. He laid hold of my shoulder like a low-down blackguard and said to me, 'Wait up, General Welfare. A dead corpse has been found beside Flat Creek out beyond Bert Sausagemill's hog wash. Better take your hounddog sniffer out there and nose around a bit. You might smell out a murder.' There it is, sir, word for word."

Claybrook frowned at Welfare. "What was your response?"

"According to my duty, I repaired at once to Herbert Sozingill's hog wash, just beyond which point—and largely concealed by bushes—I found said body. Smashed bushes and heel gashes in soft earth indicated that a tremendous struggle had occurred there and ended in a most brutal murder."

"Did you recognize this dead body?"

"As was my duty as coroner of Flat Creek, I immediately summoned a jury and held an inquest, which disclosed to my jury—"

"I asked you, sir, did *you* recognize this dead body?"

"Certainly."

"Whose was it?"

"It was Purefoy Colwood, a gold-panner who, a few days before, had discovered a fabulous pocket of gold nuggets in one of Flat Creek's countless under-water pot holes. Unfortunately, Colwood let too many people know about his sudden wealth, including a certain no-good and arrogant smoothy named Zink-or-swim Yarmouth."

Paddock Trundy raged up. "Object, your honor. This toad was not asked to disclose his cheap and gratuitous suspicions. It is all too apparent that in his effort to picture himself as a smart and heroic coroner, he succeeds only in revealing his inherent and all pervading conceit. It is no part of his function to discover who committed a murder. His job ends when he has determined that a murder has occurred. Defendant objects."

"Your honor," said Claybrook, "I feel constrained to agree with Mr. Trundy."

"Don't overstrain yourself," said Steele. "If Trundy's right, he's right for a mighty wrong cause." He turned for an indulgent look at Boaz Welfare. "Mr. Welfare, your industry is most commendable. Thank you, sir. You are now excused." When Welfare had strutted out, Steele snarled at Claybrook, "Fetch in a witness who knows something about this murder."

A thick-shouldered, greasy-fingered Dutchman was brought in.

Claybrook confronted him. "Your name, sir?"

"My name, it is Wilhelm Kietelfut."

"Better known as Will Kittlefoot?"

"Maybe so, yes, but my true name, it is Wilhelm Kietelfut."

Claybrook's expression was impassive. "What is your business, Mr. Kietelfut?"

"I am a butcher. Herbert Sozingill is my partner. Herbert, too, is a butcher."

"Your partner is sometimes called Bert Sausagemill?"

"I think so, yes. I wouldn't be surprised if he is."

"Would you be surprised if he isn't?"

Defendant's lawyer half-rose. "May it please your honor, I suggest that this case is developing too many surprises."

STEELE'S temperament precluded any forays into comedy. "Trundy,

I suggest you be patient. Your big surprise is yet to come."

"If your honor please," said Claybrook, "Mr. Trundy's penchant for levity is no doubt designed to mislead his hearers into regarding murder as something trivial. In that respect, however, his *modus operandi* is not new in this court. Other defense lawyers who have tried it, found that it did them no good."

"Wade," Steele commented sourly, "you're ignoring your own advice against wasting time. Question your witness."

Claybrook responded with stubborn leisure, "Mr. Kietelfut, you mentioned that you have a partner."

"That is so, Mr. Claybrook. Herbert Sozingill, he is my partner. Herbert and I am both butchers. Our place is out beside Flat Creek. Out there we butcher beef. Also, we butcher hogs when hogs is to be had. Sometimes we butcher a buffalo, but no more is there much buffalo to be butchered."

Trundy eased up. "Did you and your partner also butcher a man named Purefoy Colwood?"

"I object, your honor," said Claybrook. "Mr. Trundy will have his chance to cross-examine this witness."

"What I want to know is," said Steele, "does this greasy Dutchman know anything about a murder."

"If your honor please, I shall ask him."

"It's taking you a long time to get round to it."

With a burst of orneriness Claybrook asked, "Kittlefoot, tell what you know about Colwood's murder."

"Assuming, of course, that there's been a murder," Trundy volunteered. "To be entirely proper, Mr. Claybrook should ask this witness if he knows how Mr. Colwood came by his death and leave to our jury whether or not it was by murder."

Claybrook ignored him and nodded at Kietelfut. "Go ahead with your story."

Sweat stood in tiny globules on Kietelfut's face. "You want to know my story? Then I tell you my story. Herbert Sozingill, he is my partner. It is Saturday night. I like my beer on Saturday night. My partner, so does he like his beer. So I say to him, 'Herbert,' I say, 'are you ready to go and have your beer?' And Herbert says to me—"

Trundy was up, ready. "Object, your honor. Hearsay evidence is not admissible; he should not be permitted to tell what somebody said to him."

"That is correct, your honor," said Claybrook.

Steele's voice was a quietly menacing growl. "Consarned lawyers. What this witness is saying ain't evidence at all; so what difference does it make, whether it's hearsay or not? Go ahead, Kittlefoot."

Kietelfut twisted enough to smile appreciatively at Steele. "That's right, Judge. It is now that I lead up to evidence."

"Keep leading."

"Yes, sir, Judge. Well, now, Herbert says to me, 'I would like to have my beer.' Herbert is my partner, Judge. Well, I and Herbert has a dog. So we chain our dog to a post and go away to have our beer. Herbert is saying to me, 'Wilhelm,' he says, 'it would be nice if sometime again we could have some beer like old times.' By that he means Cooksy Blair's beer, it is no good.

"I say to him, 'What is wrong with Cooksy Blair's beer?' Herbert says to me then, 'It is no good beer. It is not so much gooder as hog-wash. I would like sometime some beer like Old Country beer, color like gold and foam to run down my chin. Ah, that was beer,' says Herbert."

CLAYBROOK got up peevishly. "Now, your honor, this has nothing

whatever to do with who killed Purefoy Colwood. I object to this useless digression into delectable fields of alcoholic memory."

Momentarily, Steele felt indulgent toward his man Claybrook. "All right, Wade, you handle him."

Claybrook got Kietelfut's attention. "Sir, on your way to town for your evening beer, did you and Sozingill meet anybody?"

"We do not meet somebody, but we see somebody."

"Whom did you see?"

"Well, now, it is a path we follow, I and Herbert. Below us which goes out of town along Flat Creek is there another path. It is there we see somebody."

"Proceed."

"It is two men we see."

"Did you recognize them?"

Kietelfut rubbed his chin. "No, I guess I don't think so."

Steele leaned toward Kietelfut and explained patiently, "Kittlefoot, Mr. Claybrook means, did you know them two men you and Sausagemill saw?"

Wilhelm nodded gratefully, "Oh, now I see. Yes, Judge. It is this way. When those two men we see, I say to Herbert, 'Now that is strange. Could maybe they be going out to our place?' Herbert says to me, 'I do not think so. By that path, it is not to our place.'

"Herbert says to me more. 'Wilhelm,' he says, 'do you know them?' It is getting about solid dark by now, but I say to Herbert, I say, 'I do not know them. Do you know them?' Herbert says to me, 'I do not know them.' 'But it is strange,' I say, 'that they are going out of town after dark.' And Herbert says to me—"

"Object," shouted Paddock Trundy. He was up, his fists clinched, indignation in his hard countenance. "Your honor has ruled that hearsay is admissible, so long as it's not evidence. Now, sir, this is about to be evidence."

"Trundy," said Steele, "you said a mouthful."

"Then it should be excluded. Defendant objects to Kittlefoot's further quotation of what somebody else said. He can tell what he himself said, and that is all."

Steele glanced at Claybrook. "All right, Wade, take his hide off."

Claybrook responded readily and disappointingly, "Heretofore your honor has admitted in evidence what defendants themselves have said in relation to their intention to commit crimes. You have not heretofore allowed one witness to quote what some other witness or prospective witness has said. We are here faced with true hearsay which, by well established rules of evidence, is not admissible."

"All right, Wade, this witness knows something important. If hearsay is improper, use something else, but get it out of him."

Claybrook lowered his gaze and pinched his chin in thought. After a moment he looked at Kietelfut. "You will not be permitted to relate what Sozingill said to you, but you may relate whether or not he recognized either of those men."

"Do you mean did Herbert know they are Zinker Yarmouth and Foy Colwood?"

"Object," shouted Trundy. "That's a leading question."

"I asked no question, sir, leading or otherwise," retorted Claybrook.

"But if your answer is yes, that makes his question your question, and I say it's leading."

STEELE'S impatience mounted. "Beconsarned, you lawyers are as technical as a woman's knittin'. Set down, both of you." He waited until they were seated, then faced Wilhelm. "By thunder, Kittlefoot, you know what's troubling these lawyers, don't you?"

Wilhelm nodded gravely. "Mr. Clay-

brook would like to know something which Mr. Trundy would not like him to know. So Mr. Trundy thinks he has his way because I do not know how to tell it."

"You said it exactly, Kittlefoot. Now go ahead and tell it."

Kietelfut put himself at ease. "Well, now, Judge, I and Herbert has stopped to see who is coming along Flat Creek where is a path there and two men. We are not talking now, because it is a light we see. A cigar one man is smoking, and this light we see makes us stop talking about Cooksy Blair's low-grade beer. When I have said, 'Who is it, Herbert?', Herbert grunts and shakes his head. Herbert does not know who it is. He does not know because it is dark.

"But pretty soon Herbert knows. Of those two men we see going out of town, Herbert thinks one is Foy Colwood. Those two, they are just below us, and that one who walks ahead turns like he wants to go back to town. It is then that other one makes a big draw on his cigar and puts a bit of light on Colwood's face. It is not much light, but it is light some. It is enough for I and Herbert. We know then for sure it is Colwood. We do not hear what is said, but when Colwood tries to go back this other man won't let him pass. They stand there a little while, and then they walk on like going out of town."

"Did that cigar also put light on its smoker's face?' asked Steele.

"No, Judge, I do not see his face like I and Herbert sees Colwood's face. So I do not know who he is, and my partner Herbert does not know. So we go on and have our beer."

Steele cast a sharp glance at Claybrook. "Anything else you want out of this witness?"

"No more questions," said Claybrook.

Trundy got up and came round, shabby and baggy, but determined. He walked back and forth and swung his fists. "Your honor, I'd like to call attention to just one thing. This witness has said that Herbert knew it was Colwood. How does he know what Herbert knew? Is he a mind-reader?"

"Why don't you ask him?" Steele suggested dryly.

"Because I don't want to ask him, if your honor please. If I asked him, he could only indulge in further hearsay. Every person accused of crime is entitled to a fair trial. This defendant is being denied his legal and constitutional right to a fair trial. A witness has been permitted to speculate on what somebody else knew, yet there is no legal way in which this witness could have known what Herbert Sozingill knew."

"That's enough," Steele cut in. "If it makes any difference, you can ask this witness how he knows what Herbert knowed. If you've got no questions, set down."

"But, sir, I have a question." Trundy stopped his tramping, faced Kietelfut and yelled, "How do you know Herbert knew it was Colwood?"

"Herbert told me."

Trundy resumed his walk. "There you are," he shouted. "Pure hearsay. Nothing but pure hearsay. Here is a defendant on trial for his life, yet conviction is sought on pure hearsay."

"Set down, Trundy."

"Sir, I have not finished."

"Set down, or you soon will be finished, by thunder."

Deputies converged upon him, and Trundy found himself being assisted roughly into his chair.

STEELE jerked his head at Claybrook. "Wade, whar is that other greasy Dutchman?"

"He's our next witness, your honor."

"Get him in hyar."

Herbert Sozingill replaced his part-

ner. He was broad-shouldered, short, smooth-faced and greasy.

"Your name?" asked Claybrook.

"Herbert Sozingill, it is my name."

"Did you on last Saturday night go with your partner Wilhelm Kietelfut down to Cooksy Blair's saloon to have a beer?"

Trundy got up. "That's a leading question, your honor."

"That's a right proper question," Steele responded. "Claybrook could consume an hour getting to this point. He's to be commended for getting thar at once. Set down."

Sozingill said, "I and my partner Wilhelm did go for a beer last Saturday night. It is about what we saw, is it, that you want to know?"

"Yes," replied Claybrook. "What did you see?"

Sozingill replied carefully, "It is two men we see. They are going along a path one way and I and Wilhelm is going along another path another way. We stop when it is a light we see. Below us after some time they also stop. There is a man with a cigar I do not know. But when he makes a big fire on his cigar, I see somebody I do know. It is Foy Colwood."

Claybrook asked, "When you and your partner had returned from town, what did you see or hear?"

"We have our beer," said Herbert. "Then we come back. I and my partner has a dog. His name, it is Much van Howl, or mostly just plain Muchy. Before we reach our place, we hear Muchy howl and bark. He is looking down beyond our hog wash. When we turn him loose, he goes to what he is barking at, and it is a dead man. I and Wilhelm takes a lantern, and it is Foy Colwood. A knife has stick him in many times, and he is much bloody. No knife is there, but many weeds and bush is broke down, many tracks, and blood all about. We chain Much van Howl to his post again and go back to town. There it is Sheriff Buckalew we tell about it."

"That's all," Claybrook announced and sat down.

"No cross-examination," said Trundy, rising leisurely. "What is there to cross-examine anyhow? This witness has proved nothing except what was already known, namely, that Purefoy Colwood's dead body was found beside Flat Creek beyond Will Kittlefoot's hog wash. Unless Mr. Claybrook has more proof, I suggest that your honor direct a verdict of not guilty forthwith."

"I have more proof," retorted Claybrook. "Next witness, Finn Castle."

Castle was under middle-age, slim, modest.

Claybrook dispensed with preliminaries. "Sir, do you work for Wells-Fargo?"

"Yes."

"On this last Monday forenoon, did one Zink-or-swim Yarmouth, namely, this defendant here bring to your office for shipment a bag of gold nuggets?"

"He did, sir, a bag containing twenty-three pounds and nine ounces of pure gold."

"That is all, sir."

TRUNDY got up. "Mr. Castle, did Mr. Yarmouth tell you where he got so much gold?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"From various and sundry business deals."

Trundy sat down.

"Next witness, Claybrook."

"We rest, your honor."

"What do you mean, rest?"

Claybrook got up lazily, indifferently. "If your honor please, it should be apparent that a case of circumstantial evidence has been made out against this defendant. By saying that we rest we mean to say we have no more proof, except any that may be offered in re-

buttal of defendant's testimony, if any he has."

Steele was puzzled. In his opinion Claybrook had made out a mighty sorry case. He remembered something, however, which caused him to withhold comment. In other days he had a few times sat in at poker with Wade Claybrook, and had found him a dangerous opponent, one who was not afraid to take a chance. Be-consarned, it looked as if maybe he held a poker hand now and intended to gamble on it.

Steele turned his curiosity upon Paddock Trundy, found him hesitating, figuratively studying his cards. He was being invited to gamble not with money, but with a man's life. Sweat glistened on his face, his eyes glinted.

Suddenly he nudged his client. "You're next, Yarmouth. Tell your story straight."

Yarmouth came round and sat down. Isolated as a witness, he looked crafty, treacherous, mean.

Trundy was standing. "You are charged with having murdered one Purefoy Colwood last Saturday night. Did you do it?"

"I did not, sir. When that murder was being committed, I was nowhere near Bert Sausagemill's hog wash. I left Flat Creek at early dusk and rode straight to Cloud's Fork, where I remained until midnight."

Trundy sat down, and Claybrook got up.

"Sir," said Claybrook, "do you smoke cigars?"

"Never smoked a cigar in my life."

Claybrook sat down.

Trundy nodded at defendant, who went back to his seat.

"Next witness for defense," said Trundy. "Leb Cassoway."

Cassoway was dark-haired, long-faced and shifty, in Steele's opinion a character who'd have sworn anything he was paid to swear.

"Mr. Cassoway," said Trundy, "are you acquainted with defendant, Zinker Yarmouth?"

"I am, sir. He was at my place at Cloud's Fork last Saturday night. Rode in about eight o'clock and stayed till near midnight. Yes, sir."

"That's all, Mr. Cassoway."

Claybrook got up nonchalantly, and again Steele had that feeling that Wade was playing poker. "Does your friend Yarmouth smoke cigars?" Claybrook asked.

Cassoway was startled. He considered his answer, then said, "I do not know. Maybe he does; maybe he don't."

"That's all."

Cassoway was shoved out by a deputy sheriff, and there was a brief, suspenseful silence. Meanwhile Claybrook spotted a man among Flat Creek's spectators. "Laird Golinger, come up."

A man of medium size in a tight-fitting brown suit, high white collar, and wearing a waxed mustache came forward. "What's wanted, Mr. Claybrook?"

"You're wanted as a witness."

Golinger was sworn and seated.

TRUNDY ROSE promptly. "Your honor, this cannot be. It has been a rule for hundreds of years that witnesses in criminal cases must be excluded while a trial is in progress, except when testifying. Golinger has been present throughout this trial. He is, therefore, disqualified."

"Now, see hyar, Trundy, you better know what you're talking about."

"It is apparent that he does not," said Claybrook. "His exclusion rule does not apply to rebuttal witnesses."

Trundy's breathing was hard and angry. "This is about as vile a bit of trickery as I've ever seen," he raved. "Mr. Claybrook has deliberately withheld what should have been direct testimony."

"Your honor," said Claybrook with unusual calm, "I had no intention of

calling this witness, provided defendant resorted to truth and only truth in his defense. This witness has been called to prove that Zink-or-swim Yarmouth is a brazen-faced liar."

Yarmouth heaved up. "Take that back, Claybrook, or I'll strangle you with these bare hands."

Trundy pulled at Yarmouth's coat. "Sit down, you fool."

Sheriff Buckalew had already nodded at his deputies. Yarmouth saw them coming and dropped onto his seat.

Claybrook looked with poker-faced indifference at Laird Golinger. "What is your business?"

"I have a store, sir, dealing principally in men's goods."

"Including tobacco and cigars?"

"Yes."

Claybrook lifted something from his table which theretofore had been covered by papers. He walked up and presented it to Golinger. "Do you recognize that?"

Golinger's eyebrows lifted. "Why, yes, I do."

"What is it?"

"It's a cigar stub."

"A half-smoked cigar?"

"That's what it is, yes, sir."

"What's that fastened round it?"

"Why, that's a cigar band."

"Did you put it on there yourself?"

Golinger twisted uncomfortably. "Have I got to answer that question before all these people?"

"You have, sir. Moreover, I'd advise you to answer truthfully."

Golinger swallowed. "All right, I will, even though it makes me out a dishonest tradesman. I bought a packet of these bands from a slick-tongued drummer. It says on this band *Habana Queen*. So far as I know, there ain't no such cigar. Last Saturday about dusk I saw Zinker Yarmouth heading for my place. He was such a rare-back strut that I thought I'd play a trick on him. So I put this band on one of his regular kind and charged him double for it. Made him think rich men smoked no other kind."

"Did he fire it up then and there?"

"Yes, sir, he did. Didn't remove that band either. Seemed to take great pride in it. Said he was right then leaving for Cloud's Fork and would enjoy his smoke as he rode along."

"Did you sell any other cigars so banded?"

"No, sir, only that one."

Claybrook sat down. "No more questions."

Trundy sat glum and said nothing. His countenance was that of a man who had gambled ill-advisedly and lost.

CLAYBROOK got up and nodded. "Dan Trewhitt, you're next."

Trewhitt, almost seven feet tall and weighing two hundred fifty pounds, came round and took his seat as a witness.

Claybrook casually handed him Exhibit Number One. "Deputy Trewhitt, do you recognize that?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Claybrook, shore do."

"How come?"

"Well, sir, that half-smoked cigar is what I found out there where Foy Colwood's dead body was found."

Claybrook glanced at Steele. "That's our case, your honor. From these circumstances only one reasonable inference can be drawn, namely, that defendant murdered Foy Colwood, then rode to Cloud's Fork in a futile attempt to establish an alibi."

Trundy got up in desperation, came round and confronted Trewhitt. "Now, sir, do you know how that cigar stub happened to be where you said you found it?"

"No, sir, shore don't, Mr. Trundy."

"Are you sure you didn't find it somewhere here in town and drop it out there yourself?"

Steele leaned forward in outraged wrath. "See hyar, you connivin' stink-

er, you can't talk that way to Dan Trewhitt. Get over thar and set down. By thunder, this witness has got no reason to tell a crooked story, and he wouldn't tell one if he did have a reason for it." He settled back and jerked a thumb at his jurors. "Fetch in a verdict."

They got up and filed out. Presently they were back. One of their number, a solemn-faced gold-digger, remained standing. "Guilty, Judge. First-degree murder."

Steele turned to Sheriff Buckalew. "Hang him up, Bucky."

While officers and spectators engaged in their noisy exodus, Steele remained in his place. His roving eyes came to rest, first upon Paddock Trundy, then upon Wade Claybrook. They were getting their papers together, each now seemingly indifferent to what had occurred. For a moment he saw them in a new light, especially Claybrook.

For once Wade had played his hand in masterly fashion. It was a gamble, because he could have lost. Trundy, too, had taken a chance; had he not done so, his client might have gone free. Yet it was Zinker Yarmouth who had gambled most. His stake had been his life, as was true of all murderers. Truer still, it was a ruthless tradition that gamblers paid when they lost.

How To Shoot A Man Alive

Special Feature by Bess Ritter

IF A MAN named Ross Taylor hated motion pictures about the wild and wooly west, he'd be the most frustrated person in Hollywood, because he makes his living by "killing" western heroes. But they don't stay dead.

He got his start in this unique business in 1948, when he developed a trick pellet gun, which is used to provide a realistic effect in breaking the kind of glass that is utilized so liberally as western-saga props, such as saloon windows, whisky bottles, and all kinds of mirrors. The gun is operated by compressed air, and also shoots dust pellets. This realistically suggests near misses in all types of western movies.

Later on, Ross developed other fake western weapons, such as a gun which shoots a knife, although it looks (to the camera) as though the actor threw it, and another gun which fires "real" Indian flaming arrows. It has an almost-invisible metal disc near the tip which shields the flame while the missile is in flight. Both weapons use compressed air, is drawn from a portable tank.

Then there's a weapon which he calls a "fountain." This operates with the help of battery and wires. It sets off dust explosions around the actor. But perhaps the most dramatic weapon in his entire collection is a short-bladed knife. It is used for closeups, and when plunged into the victim, it gives the realistic impression of deep penetration. The truth is, however, that it really sinks into a special body protector, which is another one of Taylor's innovations, and is constructed almost entirely of steel plate and wood.

THE CATTLE BORROWER

by Julius Elman

If there was any rustling to be done in these parts, Manuel Carrilo would handle it himself . . .

MANUEL Carrilo had skin the hue of well made coffee, eyes as black as a nugget of hard coal in sunshine, a body as slim and lithe as a weasel's, and a reputation, not wholly unlike that humorous four-footed dog taunter, calf stealer, clown, wise guy and killer of the mountain ranges, the coyote; except that Manuel was said to have a soft heart.

Matchless as a mountain cowboy, was also a cattleman of a sort. That is to say, he assumed an unannounced partnership with any Sierra Montosa stockman who happened to neglect the prompt branding of his calves. And, most characteristic of all, he had never been caught. There were some among the poor people, both gringo and native, around Santo Nino who hoped he never would be.

Manuel came riding down out of the timber in the crispness of an hour before sunup, with a hind quarter of freshly butchered baby beef tied on behind his saddle in a sack. He rode by a brushy short-cut trail to a tumbly looking cabin on a low pine bench a few miles from Santo Nino. He drew rein before the cabin and hallooed.

A tired looking woman, not so very old, but gray haired and stooped, came to the door. "Good morning, Meez W'ite!"

Manuel was already down from his horse. His quick, slender fingers untied the saddle strings and he stepped to the door with the sacked beef quarter. The woman's face lighted with a smile of mixed pleasure and hesitation. She held open the door for the Mexican to step inside with his burden.

On a home-made plank bed in one corner of the room old Barney White, his face thin, the gray hair wispy on his almost bald head, raised himself to an elbow. "Who is it, Marthy?"

His voice had a strange quality of dread in it.

The woman pulled aside a gunny sack curtain from a small window, let-

ting in a pinkish gray of morning light. The old man saw who the visitor was and sank back to his pillow with a sigh of relief. "Ah! Manuel. Ye scared hell outa me steppin' in here this time o' day. Ye shore travel early now, don't ye?"

Manuel laughed and shrugged. "The early bird, Meest' W'ite, she's ketch the gusano! Mira! I'm breeng yu here one little present! The fat hin' leg of one calf I'm find ketch in the boosh! Mebbe so in time for you' brekfas'. You like eet, no?"

Barney White's leathery, wrinkled face sobered. "You—you stole it, Manuel?"

Manuel laughed again. "Oh, no senior! Don't I'm told you I'm find heem all ketch up in the boosh?"

"Then it's one of mine, Manuel, eh? One of the lost bunch the Hansons tried to crook me out of?"

"Caramba que no!" the Mexican shrugged his slim, limber shoulders. "Thees calf, Tio, she's no belong to nobody. She's joost one calf I'm find ketch up in the boosh, so I'm take pity an' kill heem! Sabe the burro? How you feelin' thees morneeng, Meest' W'ite?"

Barney White felt better, he said. Which still was none too good. Nearly a year before, getting too old for such business, he had tangled with an outlaw bronc and come out of it with a cracked hip that had kept him between bed and crutches ever since.

With the hurt, bad luck had settled on him like a flock of hungry buzzards. The mortgage on his little ranch had not been pushing him even though overdue and he could some day have paid it out. But the bank failed and the receiver sold the mortgage to a couple of newcomers, Fred and Eli Hanson, who promptly foreclosed and kicked him out without so much as giving him time to find a place to live.

The Hansons seemed to be pretty smart young bucks. Nobody knew just where they came from, and they brought with them a little bunch of cattle bearing a great variety of brands on their hides, topped off, of course, with their own FEH—pretty fresh on some of them, too. They not only got old Barney White's place, but also laid claim to his little bunch of cattle as necessary to satisfy the mortgage. It was a fake claim, but old Barney did not know it. And his queer, "loner" ways had made him no intimate friends, so that he was alone and too sick to fight them.

They made their crooked bluff stick and got possession of fifty head of cows with calves at their sides. That was about mid-winter when the cattle were all down from their Sierra Montosa Range, either on the ranch itself or in the foothills nearby.

Then the Hanson buckos pulled a boner. They found a none too scrupulous buyer for all the cows except a couple, planning to keep the calves themselves. In their haste to cash in for the cows and get them off their hands they hurried them off for delivery without stopping to take time to smack their FEH on the calves, which they left corralled with two old cows at the ranch.

WHEN THEY rode back three days later the two cows and forty-six calves were gone. Also the winter's first snow had arrived, five inches of it, and there were no tracks. The Hansons were furious. They rode far and wide through the foothills and found not one head. They threatened old Barney White with everything from torture to death itself, but he would not tell them what had happened to the calves, which, however, he still considered his.

And no wonder old Barney would not tell them. He didn't know himself. Nobody else seemed to, either, though some might have hazarded a guess. The bunch had simply disappeared.

Under the circumstances the Hansons could hardly turn to the law for assistance. But they were a heartless pair, and persistent. They made life miserable for old man White, bed-ridden though he was.

The Hansons lost a few of their fat steers before spring, and a nameless, unidentified friend kept old Barney White supplied with meat. Towards spring old Barney learned who it was, and from Manuel Carrilo he learned also what had happened to the bunch of calves. They had broken from the corral, Manuel said, and unaccountably strayed clear up across the high range of the Sierra Montosa and down into the maze of Canones Escondidos (Hidden Canyons) on the other side. They had wintered well down on the Pecos side and were now on the bunch grass slopes above Bear Creek and doing well.

This morning, Manuel had further news. He had seen the calves again and por vida del diablo they were all branded!

"First look I'm t'eenk she's the FEH brand from my frien's the Senores 'Anson. But I'm trow rope on one calf an' I'm find she ees not that brand. She ees a bran' like one perro cuadrado —one square dog lookin' to the west.

Manuel got out a piece of paper and drew the brand. It did bear a decided resemblance to a dog. His eyes twinkled.

Old man White sighed. "Whose brand is it?"

The Mexican's answer was a shrug. How should he know?

"Then I reckon I've lost 'em jest the same as if the Hansons had got 'em." He groaned and turned over, his face to the wall.

The Mexican got up to go. "Mebbe so yes, Tio," he said. "Mebbe so no, quiza quien sabe?"

He went out quietly.

Old Barney White turned in bed to let his wife prop him up for breakfast. The aroma of broiled young beefsteak filled the cabin. But it did not stir old Barney's appetite. On his face was the look of a whipped dog.

"Well, we've lost 'em fer sure now, Marthy," he said bitterly. "Manuel brings us meat and things an I ain't sayin' I don't appreciate it, but that don't mean he would not like well enough to have them calves hisself. That Carrilo, I tell ye, is a mighty slick hombre!"

"There now, don't fret!" Martha White managed to smile. "Manuel brung ye a can o' tobacco, too. Shall I git ye yer pipe?"

That same day Fred and Eli Hanson came to see Barney White. They were big, heavy necked men, small eyed, long armed, red faced. Fred's upper lip bore a bristly blond mustache. Eli's plump cheeks showed ruddy above a short, curly, reddish beard that seemed never to get any longer nor ever to have been trimmed. Both men wore .45's at their hips and their horses seemed always to be all a-lather with sweat.

Martha White saw them coming and barred the door. They knocked, then started to walk in. When the door would not open Eli swore and gave it a kick.

"Open up, old woman!" he called harshly. "Before I kick yer door down!"

FRED WENT to the window and stuck his face in through a broken pane.

"Don't be a fool, White!" he said. "We ain't aimin' to hurt yuh! It's about them calves. We've located 'em! Yuh ain't entitled to it, but we wanta do what's right. We've come to settle with yuh, fer 'em. Let us in!"

At a motion from the old man, Mrs. White opened the door.

"Now then," said Fred Hanson, "here's the proposition. This Mex, Carrilo, comes an' tells us this mornin'

that them calves is all okay over acrost the range. We're goin' after 'em. They're our'n, o' course, by rights, bein' the offspring of the cows yer loan was made on, borned before the loan was paid. But the sows bein' already sold, to handle 'em right we need a new bill o' sale. I've brought it here fer yuh to sign, and fer the favor we give yuh twenty-five dollars. If that ain't fair enough then I don't know. Here, sign this!"

Barney White took the proffered bill of sale and tore it to shreds between his fingers.

"Twenty-five dollars fer forty-six yearlin' an' two cows? I'll starve first! Both of ye kin go plumb to hell! Git out!"

Eli Hanson suddenly brought his gun's snout out under the old man's nose. "You'll sign fer us, damn yuh, or I'll blow yuh to hell!"

Old man White did not waver. His lips were drawn tight across his teeth. "Give me a thousand an' I'll sign it. Otherwise blow an' be damned!"

Fred Hanson laughed harshly. He motioned to his brother to put up his gun. Evidently he saw that the old man could not be bluffed, and certainly plugging him wouldn't help any.

"Suit yerself, yuh ol' fool!" he said. "The calves is ours anyhow! Come on, Eli, let's drift!"

Barney White sent his wife to the door to watch which way they went. They did not head back toward Santo Nino, but took the trail toward the Sierra Montosa. And Martha noted, too, that the slickers tied behind their saddles bulged as if with grub and blankets. Evidently they were on their way across the range after the calves.

Desperate, now, Barney sent the woman in to Santo Nino to look for Manuel Carrilo. He was nowhere to be found. Among the dozen families of Santo Nino there was no one else to whom she could appeal. The native men, for the most part, were off working in the Colorado beet fields. The three Americanos who lived there, two of them with Mexican wives, were off somewhere with a round-up.

MANUEL, in telling the Hanson brothers about those lost calves, had not mentioned the peculiar "square dog" brand on them. Nor had he been very definite about exactly where they were. He had offered his services, at five dollars a day, to act as guide for them. They laughed at him. But Manuel only smiled. These two gringos from the plains would go find the calves alone! Bueno! In a day or two they would be back—perhaps—it they didn't get lost. The spruce-timbered, canyon-cut country beyond the Sierra Montosa was a big country and treacherous—to strangers.

Three days later, during which three days Manuel had been gone from Santo Nino on a quiet business trip out away from the mountains, Fred and Eli Hanson rode back—without the calves. They had spent one day crossing the range and looking for them and two getting themselves located and finding their way back. Now they wanted Carrilo to guide them—at four dollars a day.

Manuel smiled his shrugging smile. "The price, my frien's," he said, "she's go up! For seven dollar fifty cent I go—weeth my own 'orse!"

They swore and snorted, but in the end they paid the price—three days in advance. Manuel led them up across the great high crest of the Sierra Montosa and with a mysterious, uncanny certainty down through a trailless maze of green timber, dead timber, aspen groves and parks, canyons, coves and ridges on the other side. When they made camp that night neither Fred nor Eli Hanson had any idea where they were.

By ten o' clock the next morning Manuel said they were getting into the range where he had seen the calves.

Sure enough, they began to see tracks. In the marshes, and the mulchy timber-shaded earth, soft with spring thaw, the tracks were plain, and fairly fresh.

"Goin' ever' which way!" growled Eli Hanson.

"Sure t'eeng!" smiled Manuel. "Thees cattle she get putty wild livin' all time in the bosque! She's putty much travel!"

"Seem to be all yearlin's," commented Fred Hanson. "Ought to see tracks of them two ol' cows somewheres amongst 'em!"

"Oh," explained Manuel, "I'm forget to tell you: thees ol' cows she's not weeth the bonch. Mus' be she's die from the winter, que no?"

In another hour the tracks were much fresher. Then about noon they heard a sudden crackling and crashing of brush somewhere down a steep slope slanting off into the dense thickets of a deep, precipitous canyon.

The Hansons looked at Manuel questioningly, hesitating to head their horses down such a steep slant.

"Thees damn cattles!" said Manuel with a frown. "She's get too damn wild. She's hear us coming—poff—she's ron away! But she's don't fool Manuel Carrilo. I'm putty wild myself! Mira, I'm take a queeck ron down thees ridge, then I'm drop in the canyon ahead of heem. You two joost take 'er slow down thees hill. Joost follow the tracks where they ron, sabe? Not too fas.' Joost keep on follow heem! If she's get putty rough, joost take the time. Mebbe in one, two, t'ree hour I'm ahead of heem. You behind, me befront! We make the trampa—the trap—thees canyon, she's call Canon de la Trampa!"

"But listen, Mex," growled Eli, "how'n hell do we know we're goin' to get together down there? S'pose we miss you?"

"No can miss!" Manuel assured him. "You joost follow the tracks from thees cattles. When you ketch heem up—I'm gonna be there, sabe?"

"All right," said Fred Hanson. "Come on! Let's get goin'!"

Slowly the Hanson brothers began to angle down the steep slope. Below them an occasional late snowdrift they could see the fresh tracks they were to follow. Still farther off out of sight they could hear occasional sounds of the frightened animals, as wild almost as deer.

Manuel rode down the ridge into a heavy mott of spruce and fir. But once out of sight he did not go far. Instead he turned back to the right at a little slant off the ridge on the side opposite that taken by the Hansons. While with the Hansons he had ridden slowly. Now a touch of his spurs told Chulo that his master was in a hurry. Weaving through deadfalls of down timber, contouring around the heads of steep canyons, crossing ridge saddles and gaps, dodging young fir thickets, trotting across flats of big timber, edging around marshes, Manuel hurried, picking a gradual upcourse with all the instinctive ease of a blacktail deer.

Late in the afternoon he dropped suddenly off a steep ridge into a pocketed canyon-head brown with rich bunch grass upon which grazed a number of young cattle. Manuel checked them as he rode down. They were all there, forty-four yearlings and two old cows. He knew they would be. There were only two ways out of the pocket and he had pole fenced them both.

It took him but a few minutes to bunch the herd and start them out. Chulo, as well as Manuel knew his business. That night Manuel shut the two cows in an old pole corral in another canyon pocket, far up the Oso Canyon near the top of the Sierra Montosa, and made camp. Next morning he drove the bunch across and down an open pine ridge on the Santo Nino side. By noon he had them cor-

ralled in a little out-of-the-way brush corral near his own cabin.

Then he rode over to the Hanson Ranch. As he expected, the brothers were not back. With swift skill he gathered ten head of freshly branded yearlings from a pasture nearby and hazed them out through a gate.

Presently from a sheltered cove up in the pines arose a skinny smoke and then, after a few minutes, the tangy smell of burnt hair and flesh.

About noon the next day Manuel delivered to a crafty-eyed buyer well down out of the foothills, fifty-four yearlings and two cows bearing the Square Dog brand. The deal was for cash and Manuel gave a bill of sale.

IT WAS IN the before sunup crispness of early morning the next day that Manuel drove up to the cabin of old man Barney White in a buckboard, the back end of which was made up with straw and blanket into a bed. Manuel stopped his team and hallooed. In a moment, tired and hopeless looking, Martha White opened the door a crack. Her face lighted when she saw who it was.

"Goo' morneeng, Mees' W'ite!"

In a jiffy Manuel was inside.

Manuel smiled his brown smile. Then he reached over and gently laid a roll of bills under the old man's nose.

"She was two beseros short," he said, "Wheech make forty-four calfs an' two cow, wheech come joost to one t'ousan', five hundred dollar!"

Old man White came up to his elbows in uncomprehending surprise.

"Manuel, ye mean—!"

"Hell for si! Sure t'eeng! Why not? I'm keep heem hide all winter till the price ees good. Now I'm sell heem! That Square Dog brand, Tio, I'm register her for myself las' month. Now, how you like?"

Old Barney White clutched the money in unbelieving hands.

"But—but Manuel—the Hansons—they—"

Manuel smiled and made a noise like spitting out a prune seed.

"Those chivos! Joost forget heem! Now I'm t'eenk we make queeck the pack up. I'm take you ride to 'ospital—to good doctor in Las Vegas! Putty soon ees all fix op thees bom leg, eh?"

A choky feeling gripped the leathery muscles of old Barney White's throat. With a trembling hand he held out part of the roll of bills to the Mexican.

"Not all of it—Manuel! I cain't accept it all. Ye must take a part fer—fer yer own share! Ye—"

Manuel seemed not to see the money.

"Mi parte?" He laughed aloud. "For mi parte, Tio, I'm sell some leetle cattles I'm a-borrow from my frien's the Meest Hanson. The brand I'm feex heem easy. Joost two-t'ree, leetle mark."

Even old Martha's worn face had to smile when she stopped packing long enough to look at Manuel's little brand sketches.

BUT THE old man still seemed worried. "The Hansons, Manuel—they'll be gittin' back an'—"

"They come back—mebbe so yes—mebbe so no! But seguro not much queeck! You know thees story 'bout babies in the bosque! These babies I'm leave heem in that Trap Canyon, putty soon more farther—followin' the track for lost in the woods, putty soon more farther—followin' the track from one bonch wild elk wheech she's t'eenk ees one bonch yearling cattles!"

Manuel paused to chuckle softly. Then he shrugged his limber shoulders again.

"Thees 'Anson falers—she's get back some time. Mebbe so putty mad! Chivos! Mebbe so one t'eeng she's learn for lesson: if she's gonna be any cattle steal an' crook beezness aroun' Santo Nino—well, she's gonna be Manuel Carrilo that do heem! Que no, Tio?"

THE LITTLE THINGS

by Ed Keller

When you've been warned about a man you don't know, and wouldn't recognize if you saw, then you have to keep your eyes peeled for little, tell-tale give-aways.

IN THE OLD, solid 'dobe jail, Lance Bryant thoughtfully took a drag at his fresh-rolled cigaret while he contemplated tackling the stack of mail before him. Never much of a hand for paper work, he sighed again and sorrowfully lowered his long Levis-clad legs from the spur-scarred desk. The morning sun streaming in from the window highlighted the high cheek bones and prominent chin, giving his rugged features the appearance of carved rock. The slate-gray eyes dulled slightly as he looked at the desk in front of him and his full generous mouth clamped down on the cigaret butt with beartrap finality.

For the main part, the letters were the routine thing; a couple of reward notices and bills. Then, as he picked up the last letter, he paused before opening it.

Written in the painful but studied handwriting of one who wasn't over-familiar with a pen, he noted the return address. Ben Stevenson, Sheriff of Torantos County; a couple of counties south of their own Medicine Hat.

Rapidly then, Lance tore it open and began reading. The first part of the letter finished, he stopped, laid the paper on his desk and settled back in his chair, deep in thought. Then, as if he couldn't believe he had read what lay before him, he picked up the letter and began again. Yes, there it was, yet it couldn't be true, for the letter read:

"Dear Jock:

Sorry I have to be the one to bring you the news, but your old pardner, Ab Masters, was killed yesterday. He tried to stop Harle and his gang of gunslicks when they knocked over the bank, but didn't stand a chance. I wasn't—"

Lance stopped as his eyes refused to focus for the moment. Losing Ab was almost as if Old Jock himself had passed on. Ever since Sandy's mother had died when he was nothing but a

button, the two of them, Old Jock and Ab Masters, had taken over the boy's upbringing. They'd been a couple of strict taskmasters, but the product they had turned out had been all man. Yet, there it was, Ab was dead; killed by a bunch of gun-crazy killers.

Once more Lance fastened his eyes on the paper clenched in numbed fingers, and his face took on a deathly pallor as he continued to read.

> "—I wasn't there, but they say he was cut down without a chance. Harle shot him before he knew what was going on. Ab managed to get one of them, but a dozen of their stripe wouldn't make up for one of Ab.
>
> " 'Fraid I can't give you much of a line on this fellow, he's too smart. The only thing I could discover about him is that he's a natty dresser and as cool as they come. It isn't much help but if you ever do tangle with him, watch his left hand; that's how he got Ab. Sincerely yours, Ben Stevenson, Sheriff."

Slowly Lance rose, the letter still in his hand; he had to get out and think this over. Shutting the door behind him he walked out to where his blue roan stood slack-hipped at the hitch rail. Swinging into the saddle he rode out of town, taking no special notice of the two riders that passed him, beyond noting their well worn clothing and hard faces as he returned their curt nod.

LETTING the roan set its own pace Lance Bryant let his mind run back over the events that had led up to this turning point in his life. Old Jock was lying flat on his back, in what might well be his death bed, up in the little green shuttered home that had once seen happier times.

Old Jock, stubborn to a point of being down-right bullheaded, had refused to let Lance accompany him in tracking down a lone horsethief who had made the mistake of borrowing a few head of horses without their owner's permission. When the final curtain was rung down there was one less gent to ride the Owlhoot trails, but Old Jock had added one more piece of lead to his collection—a piece that might well be the last one.

Lance had maintained that he could hold the job down until his Dad was back on his feet, but Old Jock had other ideas on that subject. Lance could still remember Old Jock's everlasting hammering about the small details of the job of wearing a badge, and it was this that had almost caused the open break between them. Old Jock had known that Lance was, as is all youth, a bit inclined to jump and then see where he had landed. He had harped on it continually until Lance had agreed to work under Ab Masters until Jock was back on his feet, not that down deep in his heart he felt he was easily capable of handling the job.

This latest news had put a different outlook on the picture, and Lance was afraid with this new blow, aside from the added worry of Lance's task, Old Jock might find it too much for him.

His jaw set grimly, Lance headed the roan back towards town, his mind made up. He wasn't going to take any chances on making Old Jock's lot a more difficult one. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him and if trouble came, well, he'd take care of that when it got there.

Once more back in town, Lance turned the roan loose in the little corral back of the jail and started up the street to make his usual morning rounds.

The town was just coming alive for the day's events, and Lance paused here and there along his route to pass a few remarks with various shopkeepers as they made ready for business. As he passed the false-fronted building that boasted of being the Number One

hotel in town, he noted with interest a couple of new mounts, with heads drooping, at the hitching rail. Idly he leaned against the post supporting one corner of the big porch as he drew the makings from his pocket and with practiced hands shaped a cigaret while he studied the brands more closely.

B Bar A and Lazy S; both brands of spreads down south. "Hm-m, quite a few visitors. First, those two I met on the way out, and now these. Say, that's funny," he mused to himself, as he resumed his walk once more. For as is habitual with all cowmen, he had subconsciously noted the brands of those mounts and they now came back to him. Maybe he was getting all spooked up, but four newcomers all riding different brands from the same general locality might be a coincidence. And then again—

TURNING into the hotel, he paused just inside the doorway and stepped to one side, bringing his back to the wall, until his eyes became accustomed to the change in light.

As Lance Bryant's presence became known, the two men standing at the desk talking to Dad Carson, the clerk, turned. One, a striking looking man with ebony hard black eyes, set apart by a thin hawk-beaked nose, came forward, as his quick scrutiny took in the star that glistened dimly in the shadows on Lance's shirt front.

As he came toward him, Lance let his eyes run over the well set up figure. Polished mirror-like boots extending to the knees into which were tucked dove-gray whipcord pants almost completely covered by the faultlessly tailored knee-length Prince Albert coat that hung from his well-set shoulders made a striking picture. The sweeping lines of the coat just failed to hide the suggestive bulge of the big gun on his right thigh.

Moving forward with the same liquid grace of a cat, he stopped in front of Bryant. His jet black eyes 'neath the shadow of the cream-colored Stetson looked with Lance's own guileless blue. Thrusting out a well-shaped hand, he spoke: "Name's Johnson. I'm looking over some mining property around these parts. The clerk here," indicating Carson with a vague gesture, "tells me you might give me some help."

"Sure, glad to," rejoined Lance heartily. "Any time I can help, just holler. Always glad to help someone interested in our county."

"That's mighty nice of you, sheriff," replied Johnson, his face breaking into a smile that somehow seemed to stop short of his eyes. Those black pools said nothing, but gave the impression to Lance that the smile was only a formal gesture. Instinctively he disliked this polished, smug man before him. His eyes shifted away to where Johnson's hands played aimlessly with the loose button that hung from the upper eyelet of the coat, strangely out of place in his immaculate attire. He let his gaze rest there momentarily as Johnson's fingers twisted it back and forth. Then his eyes flicked away, drawn to the figure of the man who had been talking to Johnson, and had now come up to stand at Johnson's right side.

"Anything special?" queried Lance.

"Why, yes, there is. My foreman here, Mr. Yates, and I, are in the market for a couple of good horses. We just came in on the stage this morning."

At Bryant's puzzled look, he went on to add: "We'll be here sometime and do a good deal of traveling about, so I'd rather buy mounts than rent them."

"I see," Lance replied, taking in the lean wolf-gaunt figure that had joined them. Clothes that had seen better days hung forlornly on the sagging shoulders. The prominent buck teeth and long lantern jaw gave him a wolf-like expression. Almost, Lance expected to see the long red tongue loll out and the saliva drool from those fangs.

The man's greenish-yellow eyes remained the same dead color as he nodded slightly by way of acknowledging the introduction.

"I got to mosey along right now," Lance continued. "Why don't you sashay down and see Billy Williams at the livery stable? He's usually got some good horseflesh and if you tell him I sent you, you won't get skinned quite so bad."

With a hastily flung "See you later, Dad," to the old man at the counter, he left the hotel and with purposeful strides bore down the street toward the jail. Twice he paused in his march, once at the bank, and two doors further down he ducked into the assayer's little office. A good ten minutes passed before he emerged, a small bag swinging freely in his hand as he headed for the jail.

While the morning sun crawled on over its ageless orbit, Lance sat in the little office. Now and again his hands strayed from the soft leather holster across his knees to the rock samples on the desk. But never for a moment at the most did his eyes leave the hotel front down the street.

SHORTLY before noon his vigil was rewarded when he saw Johnson and Yates ride up to the hotel. With a swoop of his hand he scooped the rocks that littered the desk into the small bag and headed up the street to where the two men stood. As he passed the center of the dust-covered street, Lance Bryant noted that up at the corner, the bank door was swinging closed behind the portly figure of Jim Sparrows, the old bank president.

Pulling up to a stop before the two men, Lance broke into a grin.

"Well, I see Billy didn't palm off any of his crow baits on you after all, Johnson."

"No," replied the other, smiling, "I think we made a good deal. Thanks for giving us a hand."

"Not at all," said Bryant. "Say, you being a mining man, I wonder if you'd mind giving me your opinion on some stuff I've got here. I picked them up out on Dad's spread. Maybe you can tell me if they're worth anything."

Lance felt Johnson's eyes bore into his own as he held the rocks toward him, and out of the corner of his eye noted that Yates had moved back and to his right, flanking Lance on that side. Yates was balanced forward on his toes, his thin lips drawn back in an almost snarl as he watched Bryant's face.

For a moment Johnson hesitated, trying to read something more than appeared on the young sheriff's bland face. Slowly he stretched out his right hand and took the extended samples.

Thoughtfully he studied the lumps of ore, turning them over in his hand. Handing one to Yates, who stretched out his hand rather than move in closer, he said, "Here, Sam, what do you make of this?"

Lance watched the puzzled look that fitted momentarily across Yates' face and then let his gaze rove on up the walk to where the bank president had paused to light one of his long, black cheroots.

With an imperceptable nod of his head in that direction, Lance stepped back, his hand rising to push his worn headgear farther back on his head.

Up the street, Jim Sparrows, on the lookout for just such a signal, rolled the cigar across stained teeth to the other drooping corner of his mouth, and moved down on the three men. As he came abreast of Lance his voice boomed out.

"Hi yah, Lance, just the fellow I'm lookin' for. Got a minute to spare?"

"Sure thing, Jim. What's on your mind?" answered Bryant as the banker grasped his arm and led him over to the edge of the walk.

"Well, it's like this, son," rumbled

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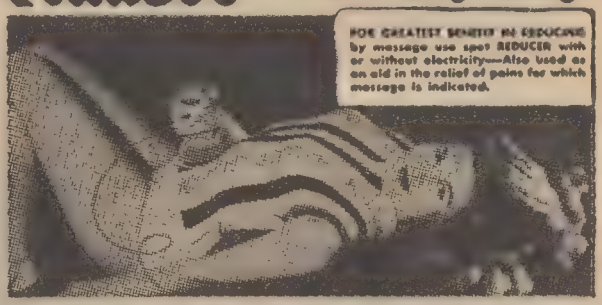

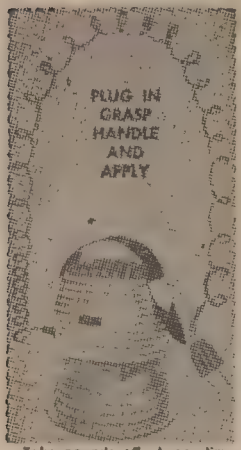

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Sparrows, his voice easily carrying to where Johnson and Yates stood making a pretended study of the ore samples. "I wanted to get your okay on having the stage pick up that gold shipment from the stage office instead of the bank. I may be out of town and the cashier is off sick today. It'd make it easier all the way 'round if you'd do it. We could take the shipment down around two o'clock and let 'em pick it up there."

Lance's eyes flicked toward Johnson, just in time to catch the look exchanged between the mining man and his foreman.

"Don't see why not, Jim. Nothing to worry about 'round this town. It'll be safe enough over there. I can sort of keep an eye on things until they pull out."

"Thanks, Lance, just wanted to let you know. We'll take it over about two," the banker rumbled, and with a parting thump on the back, he turned and rambled back toward the bank.

Turning to Johnson, Lance said, "Well, Johnson, what do you think of them?"

"I think you've got something here," replied the mining man. "Of course, you understand that's just a rough guess. I'd have to have them assayed first but I'd like to look at that property, if you're interested in minin' it. Why don't you take this stuff over and have it assayed? I could meet you there tomorrow at, say ten o'clock, and we can look over the report. Then if it's any good we can go out to your place."

"Good enough," replied Bryant, as he stepped down into the roadway. "I'll take these samples over now and see you in the morning."

LUNCH OVER, Lance Bryant once more took up his post at the

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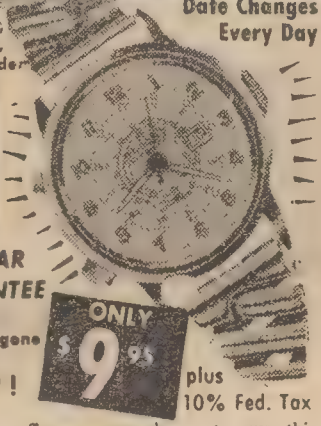

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window looking out on the street. With feet cocked up on the desk, he slouched down in the old chair, worming his hard young frame into a comfortable position. Above his head the old clock ticked methodically as his vigil dragged on. Suddenly he snapped forward, his eyes riveted on the seemingly customary movements of the figures across the street.

Sam Yates, his head swiveling for a quick look up and down the main street, had come out of the hotel and stepped down to where Johnson's and his own mount were hitched. Standing next to them were the two strange horses Lance had notcied earlier that morning when he had first made his rounds.

One of the riders leaning against the hitching rail turned as Yates came down the steps and stepped over to adjust his mount's bridle. Yates, apparently taking no notice of the other two beyond a quick scrutiny, slipped under the railing and after hooking one stirrup over the saddle horn, tightened his loosened cinch. For a moment, while his head was buried against his mount's side, he was hidden from view; then, swinging into the saddle, he reached over and, leading Johnson's horse, rode up the street.

Lance let his gaze follow Yates out of sight and then swung back to the other strange riders. The two men had mounted the boardwalk and were heading down the street toward the jail. When they were almost opposite the swinging doors of the *Happy Jack Saloon,* the bat-wing doors swung open and Lance recognized the two punchers he had passed on the way out of town that morning.

As the four men drew abreast of each other, Lance noticed the same man who had been fixing his bridle a short time previous, speak to the newcomers.

From across the street, Bryant watching eagerly, nodded with satis-

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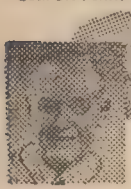

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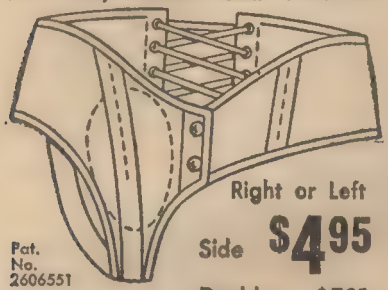

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faction as the new rider dipped a hand into his pocket and extended a match in response to the age-old query: "Got a match?"

During the time it took for the match to flare up an die away, the four stood motionless, then, as if nothing had passed between them, went on in their individual directions.

IN THE SHERIFF'S office across the way, Lance Bryant once more cocked a candid eye up at the old clock above him. For a moment his brow furrowed in deep concentration.

"Let's see," he mused to himself. "Jim'll take the bags down at two and the stage will be in at three. That gives them an hour. Time for me to get moving."

Rising, he stepped to the rack on the other side of the room and from its place in the gun rack took his father's high-hammered .44. With practiced speed he swung open the cylinder gate and inspected the loads; then with a quick flip of his wrist clicked it shut. Shifting the gun to his left hand, his right swept down to his side and the twin to the one he had taken from the rack came into view. With eye-baffling speed the guns changed hands in a double version of the famous Border Shift.

"Guess I'm kind of sentimental," he kidded himself, "but Jock always said this old iron in the hand of a lawman was bound to shoot straight," and once more that right hand dipped and came away empty.

His own gun in his hand, he walked over to the desk and slid it into the holster he had been working on. Swiftly he wrapped the loaded belt around the gun and its holster and slipped them into the saddle bags that were draped over the chair. Swinging open the door, he paused for a moment to look over the old, familiar scene, then slipped out the side door.

[*Turn To Page* 88]

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WESTERN ACTION

OUTSIDE, the roan pawed up a cloud of dust as Lance swung the saddle bags into place and tied them down.

"Well, Azul, let's get goin'," he muttered to the horse. "We haven't far, but it may be the last one."

Five minutes later he pulled up behind the stage office and swung down. Ground hitching the roan, he took the gun and holster from its place in the saddle bags and headed for the rear entrance of the building.

Opening the door, he slipped through and locked it behind him. A quick look proved his hopes correct, for with the expectation of the banker and the bespectacled clerk at the desk the room was empty.

Nervously Sparrows whirled to face him, the double-barreled shotgun in his hands swinging up. "Boy, you shouldn't ought to come in here like that," he husked. "I almost let you have it. Guess I'm gettin' as jittery as an old woman."

"Sure, don't blame you," said Lance with a strained grin. "How's things goin'?"

As he spoke his hands flipped the extra gun belt about his lean middle and shifted the belt to a comfortable position along his thigh.

"That's just the trouble," Sparrows growled. "I tell you, Lance, I don't like it one bit. Why don't you call in some of the other boys and let them give you a hand on this thing?"

"Sorry, Jim, no can do. This is my job and I'll see it through. Just you take care of this end of it, that's all I ask."

"Say," he continued, turning toward the clerk. "Johnny, take a look out front and see what's going on out there."

The green eye shade under the dim light gave the man's face an eerie expression, as he bobbed his head in jerky response and scurried to the front window. In a moment he was

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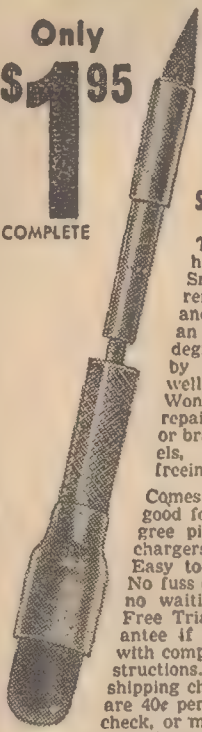

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back, his whole body atremble. Nervously his eyes switched from one to the other of the two men as the words tumbled from his scared lips.

"The street's full of them, Sheriff. There's two comin' down each end and that minin' man is over on the hotel porch."

"Thanks, Johnny," replied Lance softly. "Well, Jim, it looks like this is it. You ready?"

"I still don't like it," said Sparrows, his voice strong with emotion. "You're just like your old man, too durn stubborn for your own good. But go to it, boy; I'll side you all the way."

"Thanks, Jim," returned Lance and, followed by the other, he turned and walked to the window, both of them careful not to show themselves.

Across the street Johnson had stopped and now stood directly in front of the stage office on the other side of the dusty roadway. Idly he let his eyes swing up and then down the street. Apparently everything was to his satisfaction for he flicked the cigaret he had been smoking from him and moved out into the street, his boots sending up little puffs of dust with each step.

In the stage office Bryant whirled from where he stood and with Sparrows words, *"Watch yourself, Lance,"* ringing in his ears, stepped through the doorway.

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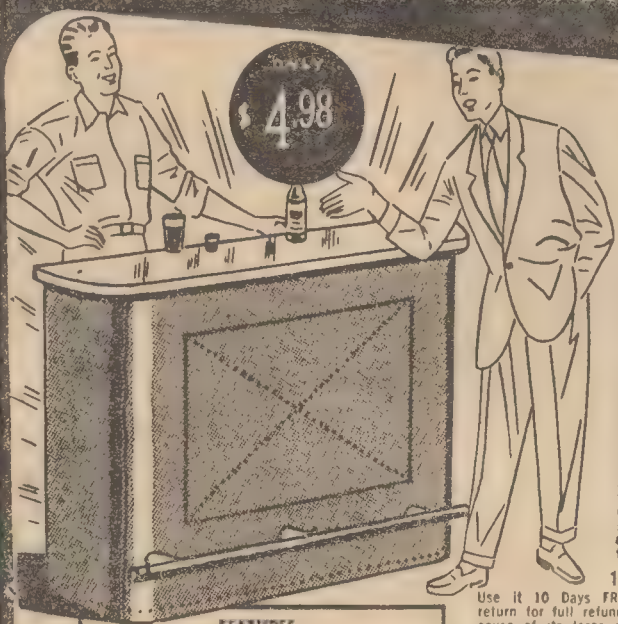

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the whole scene before him became stamped on his mind's eye.

The two men riding the B Bar A and Lazy S horses were standing by their mounts to Johnson's right, while the two Lance had passed that morning sat their saddles on his left and on the same side of the street as the stage office.

Sam Yates was just in the act of swinging down from his saddle when he saw the figure emerge from the doorway. A look of startled surprise swept across the wolfish face as he recognized Bryant and read the meaning behind the extra gun.

In the center of the street Johnson had come to a stop as he, too, took in the still figure there before him.

LANCE BRYANT riveted his eyes on those hands that hung loosely at the lapels of the black Prince Albert. Out of the corners of his eyes he watched Yates and the others as best he could. The men to his left he discounted as being out of it for the first burst of action; being too far away for accurate shooting.

With a quick bound he went forward and to the left, putting himself in a position where he could watch the two nearest men more easily. His shoulders hunched slightly, he centered his attention on Johnson and his voice, as soft as rustled silk and yet carrying clearly, rang out.

"It's all up, Harle! Give up or go for that hideout gun!"

Lance watched the words strike home as if they'd been a physical blow.

Johnson's face, still an expressionless mask, turned pasty as the blood drained away. His eyes flickered momentarily, his tongue licking out to moisten dry lips. Then his face broke into a snarl of baffled rage, and he spat out:

"Take it then, you fool!"

His right hand whipped the long

[*Turn Page*]

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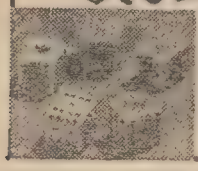

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coat open and his left swept up and under. In that moment Lance saw that loose button fly through the air before Johnson's sweeping tug. Even as it flashed through his mind, to become stamped there indelibly, his own hands were sweeping gunward.

His right-hand gun swept up, spewing lead and flames as it cleared the holster top. The left-hand Colt, a trifle slower, added its own blast as it bucked against his palm. Fast as he was, he barely beat Johnson's first shot. The slug plucked at his open shirt collar with fingers touched with death, then thudded into the wall at his back.

His own shot took Johnson's high in the right shoulder, spinning him almost completely around and knocking him to his knees.

As Johnson made his draw, Yates, with a hoarse cry, went for his own gun, hoping for a quick shot from the side.

As his right-hand gun bucked back in his hand, Lance had turned his left hand across his body, cutting down on Yates in a short, chopping shot.

Yates' mount, terrified by the roar of guns, reared frantically to get away, only to catch Bryant's first slug between the eyes. In a hailstorm of flailing hoofs he went down, taking Yates with him.

In the center of the street Johnson had struggled to his knees, his face livid with rage. His eyes flamed with mad light of death. His gun swung up to spat forth its charge, the roar blending with Lance's matching shot.

A searing pain shot through Lance's leg, sending him to one knee. His own shot had taken Johnson just under the right eye, where a small, blue hole appeared, as if by magic, to tell of its passing. For a moment the man's very hate held him erect, then as the life was blasted out of him he fell forward, dead before he hit the ground.

[*Turn To Page* 94]

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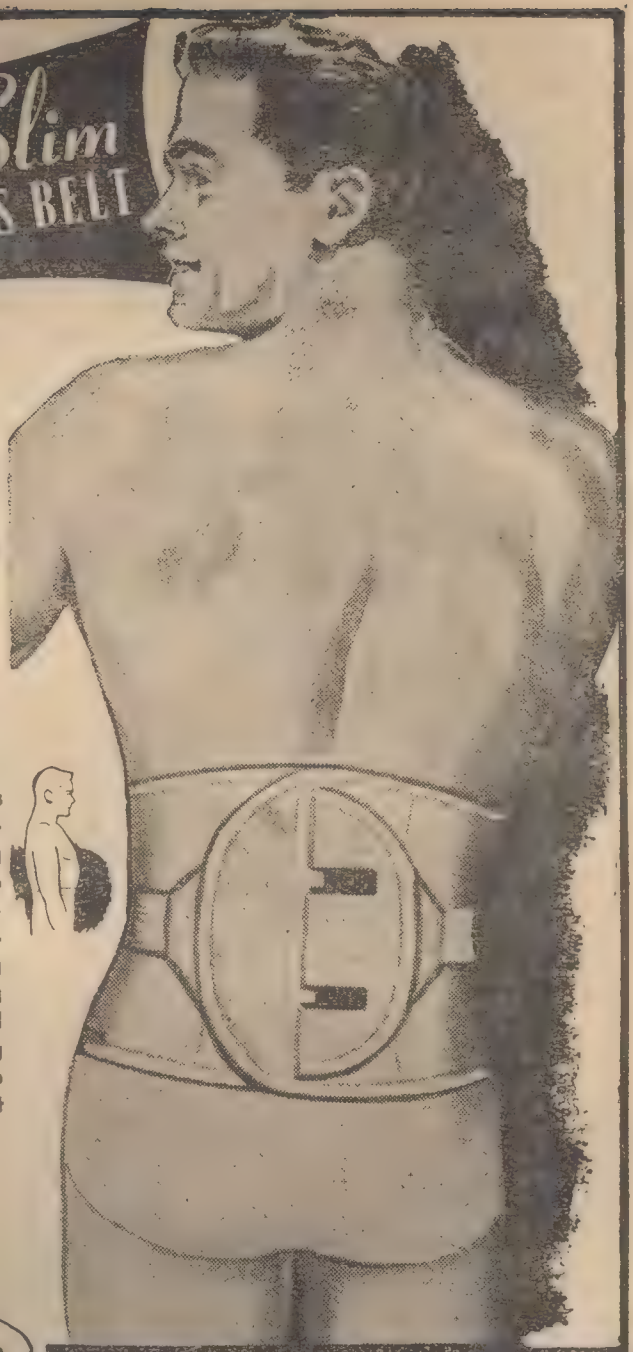

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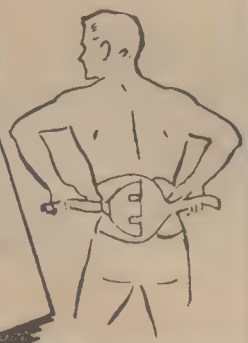

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WESTERN ACTION

Down on one knee, Lance snapped a shot from each gun at the two outlaws who had run forward from Johnson's right. Almost in a dream he heard the angry buzz of the leaden hornets of death swish past his head. Then, with a sickening thud, the whole left side of his body went numb under the impact of another slug.

Laughing crazily, he saw that one of his bullets had caught the nearest outlaw in the chest. A faint whisp of dust, knocked up by the striking slug, hung there momentarily, then was blotted out as the stricken outlaw fell forward in the street.

OVER HIS head, as if in the far distance, Lance Bryant heard the dull sodden blast of Sparrows' scatter gun. From where he lay sprawled on the porch he saw the second outlaw's shirt front spew blood in a dozen places as the heavy buckshot picked him up and hurled him back and down.

Lance, his left side now completely dead from the shocking force of the two heavy slugs, forced himself around with the aid of his propped right arm.

The two outlaws who had sat their mounts at the start of the battle were cutting down on him as they fought their plunging, gun-maddened horses in the middle of the road.

Cursing at his own helplessness, he brought his wavering gun to bear on the one nearest him. With a roar Old Jock's .44 answered the squeeze of the trigger. The rider, arms outflung, toppled sideways from the saddle.

At this the lone remaining horseman jerked his mount around and dug home the spurs. Over Lance's head, Sparrows' gun blasted. The charge caught the rider squarely in the back, dumping him headlong from his running horse.

[*Turn To Page 96*]

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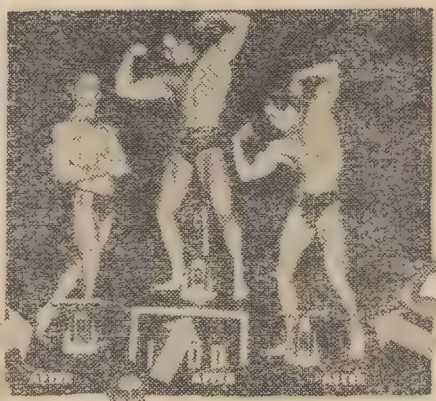

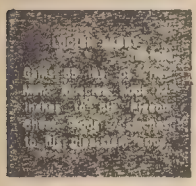

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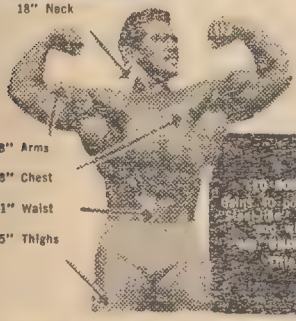

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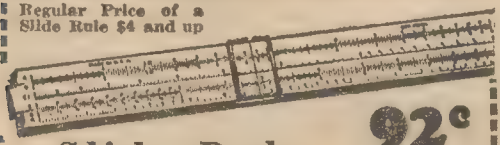

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Lance, the world dancing crazily before him, rolled forward on his face. There, leering at him, like a trapped wolf, he saw Yates' face outlined above his fallen mount. Trapped, with one leg broken by his mount's fall, he remained a killer to the bitter end. Even in his trapped position, he took time to gloat over the easy kill.

Lying there with not more than twenty feet separating him from that yawning black maw, Lance Bryant reacted only by instinct. Desperately, he twisted his gun up from where it lay before him, and triggered once. Almost, it seemed, in his very face, he saw the orange fire erupt from that gun muzzle, and then a huge hand reached out and struck him senseless.

Two days later Lance awoke to find himself next to his father swathed in bandages. He grinned faintly 'neath the bandages that surrounded his head as he heard Old Jock and Jim Sparrows in earnest conversation by his side.

"Sure," he heard Old Jock boom out, "I'll admit it was a smart move testing this fellow Harle, or Johnson, as he called himself with that fool's gold; it'd take a real miner to tell the difference. Letting them overhear you plan to move the ore shipment was smart, too, but what I'd like to know is how you got wise to that shoulder draw?"

"I'll tell you," murmured Lance faintly, as the two men spun around to listen tensely by his side. "You once told me that most gunmen that used a shoulder gun had a loose button on their coat, so that when they made their draw, there would be nothing to catch. When I saw that loose button sticking out like a sore thumb on the rest of his fancy clothes I began getting ideas." He paused, chuckling at the look on Old Jock's face. "I guess you were right as usual, Dad; it is the little things that really count."

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Mighty Rough Spell

(*continued from page 59*)

His hands trembling, he raised his Sharps. He put the sights of the rifle on a spot directly back of the stallion's ears. He shot his last bullet. The wild horses, startled by the roaring rifle, fled in terror. But the stallion lay on his side, and Clyman ran to him, halter in hand.

But his ball had done more than render the horse unconscious. The rifle bullet had killed him!

HEART hammering against bony ribs, Clyman realized, with a sinking feeling, that now his rifle was useless. He cut hunks of flesh from the dead stallion. He dared not risk a fire; the tell-tale plume of smoke would betray him to the Indians.

But within a few hours, he was a captive of the Sioux.

"They swarmed around me," he later related. "I thought my time had come. They jerked my rifle from my hands."

"How did you get away from them, Jim?"

"I had lost my hat the year before, Mike. My hair—look at it now!" Trappers saw that his hair had been hacked away. "One buck—a chief—he wanted my hair. I let him cut it with a knife. I don't know what for he wanted it, but he made a deal with me. My hair would be his, and he would help me escape."

"Sure lucky he didn't want your scalp."

Clyman dared not leave the river. Out on the prairie water-holes were few and far between, for the summer was terribly arid. The chief had given him a few ears of corn. He ate these and starvation gnawed at his belly again.

"One day, I was almost dead. I laid in a grove of cottonwoods. Two badgers come outa their dens an' started fightin'."

"Yeah?"

"I done found me some buffaler bones. Luck was with me. Kilt them both, hittin' them with bones."

"Like Samson, huh?"

"Man, them badgers tasted right good. I had some flint so I could build a fire. I laid there a coupla days, gatherin' my strength. Then I went on again. I knew that if I could keep movin', and it was the Platte I was followin', I'd have to reach the Missouri."

"You made it." It was the Platte.

James Clyman fell back into deep slumber. He had not told them about the prairie mosquitoes that had hung over him like a dark cloud, sucking his diminishing blood. Nor did he, at that time, tell them how he had one day wandered in a circle, finding at last his error by recognizing some boxelder trees he had once before seen.

"I thought I'd go loco," he later said. "For days I heard no voice but my own. I was dyin' to hear a human voice. Even the voices of them savages—they was music in my ears."

"I know how you felt, Jim. Like me, the time Bridger an' us boys was trappin' up on the Yellerstone. All winter I was snowed-in. I got so I talked to myself all the time."

"I did thet, too, Mike."

Finally the outlines of Fort Atkinson had come into his wavering vision. At first he had thought it merely another prairie heat-mirage. But then his throbbing eyes had seen Old Glory, waving in the breeze.

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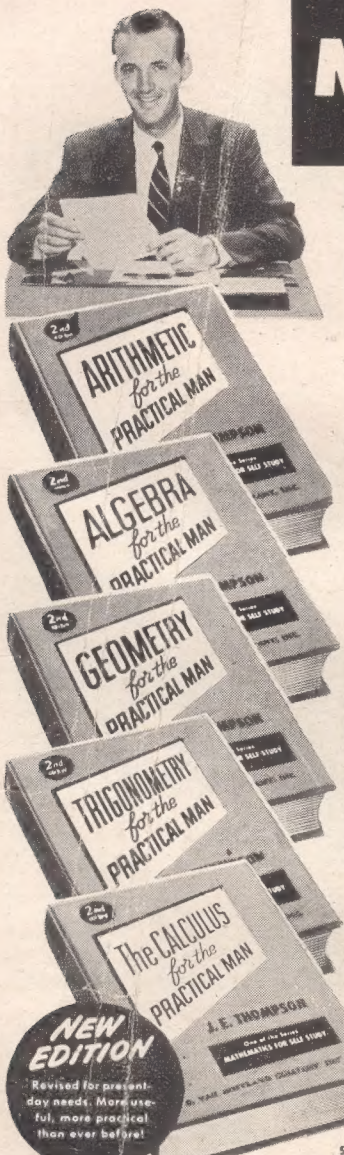

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